

FROM COLOR LINE TO COLORBLIND:
Changing African American Perceptions of the Japanese during World War II

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by

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Abstract:

Although African Americans continually reconstructed their perceptions of the Japanese throughout the Great Depression and World War II, these changing views were formed in the context of their own positions within the United States. During the 1930s, with the exception of the Communist Movement, the African American press and other intellectuals generally regarded Japan as a consequential nation challenging existing international relations and creating expectations of a new paradigm of racial equity on the world stage. Although some key intellectuals still maintained hope that Japan would serve as a leader for the “Colored races,” Japan’s aggressive invasion of China in 1937 was largely viewed as indicative of Japan’s opportunistic imperial desires, no different from those of the European powers. Overall, African American servicemen in the Pacific, while tending to be less racially prejudiced than their Caucasian counterparts towards the Japanese enemy, still regarded the Japanese as a dangerous and ruthless opponent and not as a possible liberator from discrimination in the segregated American military or society at large. African American servicemen in the Occupation of Japan reconstructed their conceptions of the Japanese based on their comparatively colorblind reception as occupiers, which ultimately led to a growing sense of dissatisfaction with discrimination upon return to the United States.

Introduction:

In the context of black internationalism, Japan as a “colored” nation entered the mindset of many African Americans as a model nation challenging preconceived notions of white supremacy. African American perceptions of the Japanese developed and changed from the 1930s through the occupation of Japan within in the context of their own positions in a hegemonic white society. Before the expanded invasion of Mainland China, many African Americans felt a commonality with the Japanese through the idea of the global color line and the struggle of all peoples of color for control over their own existences in the face of white imperialism.¹ While both intellectuals within the United States and servicemen stationed in the Pacific generally reshaped these views when confronted with the hostilities and brutality of war, the occupation of Japan saw a refining of these viewpoints through the friendly reception of many African Americans by the Japanese.

John Dower’s *War Without Mercy* is a foundational book in developing the narrative of how the Japanese and Americans viewed each other in the context of World War II. He argues that the Pacific War was a conflict driven largely by racisms, which affected much of the wartime conduct, policies, and interactions on both sides. In general terms, Americans viewed the Japanese in collective terms as a “race.” Elsewhere it was the German Nazis and the Italian Fascists who were opposing democracy and were considered the enemy. However, in the case of Japan there was no distinction between society as a whole and the enemy: “the only good Jap is a dead Jap.” Along with this mindset was the widespread dehumanization of the Japanese, most demonstrably in cartoon depictions of the Japanese as “animals, reptiles, or insects (monkeys, baboons, gorillas, dogs, mice and rats, vipers and rattlesnakes, cockroaches, vermin—or, more indirectly, ‘the Japanese herd’ and the like).”² Dower establishes these attitudes, in existence before combat even began, as the

¹ In this work, I will be relying on the framework of Dower’s *War Without Mercy* as a basis for perceptions of the Japanese during World War II. John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

² Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 81.

fundamental reason for the brutality and savage nature of the Pacific War in comparison to combat in the European Theater. The reconfiguration of these racisms in the Occupation and Postwar Era, as Dower asserts, was a necessary part of reconstructing Japan as an ally against Communism in East Asia.

Dower's analysis however is incomplete. His analysis mentions the positions of African Americans within the United States, but does not adequately address their perspectives, or their participation in the war against the Japanese. E. Patricia Tsurumi identified this weakness in her review of *War Without Mercy*: "The ambivalent response of Black Americans to their country's racist White leaders directing a war against a non-White enemy is noted, but not analyzed. Somewhat disappointing was the failure to explore more thoroughly a key theme that crops up throughout the book: the interchangeability of those chosen as victims in the history of racism."³ His use of official policies and the press indicate how racism was existent in broad sections of the public and in governmental strategy; this however does not directly indicate how those fighting the war directly viewed the Japanese. African American soldiers were arguably one of the least likely segments of the population to harbor racist ideas towards the Japanese. Why, then, did African Americans largely support the war on the home front and actively fight against the Japanese in the Pacific?

Two important monographs on African American perspectives on the Japanese have been published in recent years: Reginald Kearney's *African American Views of the Japanese: Solidarity or Sedition?* and Marc Gallicchio's *The African American Encounter with Japan and China*.⁴ Each of these works makes significant contributions to the scholarship of a long neglected field of history. Kearney details the varied and complex progression of African American thought regarding the Japanese from the Russo-Japanese War to the early 1990s, mainly through black press coverage, official government reports,

³ E. Patricia Tsurumi, review of *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War*, by John Dower, *Pacific Affairs* 59, no. 4 (Winter 1986-87): 667-669.

⁴ Reginald Kearney, *African American Views of the Japanese: Solidarity or Sedition?* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) and Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

and the writings of African American intellectuals. Gallicchio, by focusing on both relations with the Chinese and Japanese, gives a more holistic view of African American interactions in East Asia; however, he generalizes more on specific responses within the African American community to events within East Asia and is less likely to show contradicting opinions.

While these works make crucial advances in scholarship, further examination would enhance our understanding of African American views of the Japanese during the 20th century. Most African Americans did not have direct contact with the Japanese, but the interactions of those who did, such as visitors to Japan and China in the late 1930s and servicemen in the Pacific Theater and Occupied Japan are quite important. These episodes show how African Americans with firsthand experiences of Japanese society and culture viewed the Japanese, less filtered by misconceptions, hearsay, and propaganda. While these perceptions give a more nuanced approach to understanding interactions between African Americans and the Japanese during the era of the Second World War, continuity between my research and the research of Gallicchio and Kearney still remains: African Americans regarded the Japanese within the context of their own positions in the United States.

This study will look at three different aspects of African American interaction and commentary on the Japanese. The first chapter relates the viewpoints of African American intellectuals within the United States regarding Japan's international position and commentary on Japanese society through research and travel experiences. Chapter Two develops the reactions of African American intellectuals within the United States and China to Japan's expanded war in China and the perceptions of African American servicemen mainly stationed in the Pacific Theater regarding the Japanese enemy. The final chapter examines the perspectives of African American servicemen stationed in Occupied Japan and their interactions with Japanese civilians.

There are, however, limitations to this research. Based on the era and focus on World War II, there are limited references to the viewpoints and experiences of African American women. Most of the perspectives of African American servicemen are taken from oral history interviews and memoirs, which have only recently become more widely available. These recollections in most cases are decades after their actual experiences in World War II and thus certain aspects might have been altered or emphasized with the passage of time. Even considering these limitations, this work attempts to expand research on an often-neglected cross-cultural aspect of 20th Century history.

Overall, this thesis will reveal the changing attitudes of African Americans throughout the period. While African Americans tended to feel a sense of commonality with the Japanese as people of color before the war in China, Japanese actions during the war influenced the opinions of most African Americans. During the Occupation of Japan, African American servicemen reconstructed their wartime attitudes toward the Japanese through the warm, comparatively colorblind reception they experienced in the midst of a segregated military. These encounters abroad inspired a growing sense of displeasure in returning veterans regarding their position within the United States and contributed to the defiance of the status quo that led to the Civil Rights Movement.

Chapter 1: Intellectuals' Impressions Before the War

Several historians, such as Penny Von Eschen and Brenda Gayle Plummer, have focused on the rise of black internationalism and its impact on global politics and the African American community at large.⁵ As part of this international focus, many influential African American intellectuals and reporters began to incorporate discussions of Japan's role in the world and their understanding of Japanese society into their writing. Beginning with Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, mainstream news and African American newspapers alike began to cover Japan's ascendancy to imperial power in Asia. As a nation originally confined by the notion of a global color line, many African Americans came to regard Japan as a model for confronting white supremacy. During the 1930s, African American intellectuals and writers mentioned Japan in a few contexts, such as Japan's role in international events, views of Japanese society and people from the United States, and reflections from travels in Japan. In these contexts, with the exception of the Communist Movement, the African American press and other intellectuals generally regarded Japan as a consequential nation challenging existing international relations and creating expectations of a new paradigm of racial equity on the world stage.

Japan's place in international affairs and politics was most crucial to African American intellectuals, who largely perceived the Japanese as leading the way for other nations of color to take their own standing in the international scene separate from Western imperialism. Intellectuals saw this as vitally important in connection with Ethiopia's struggle to remain independent from Italy's aggression in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War in the mid 1930s. At times, Japanese imperialism was excused as an effort to liberate all of Asia from Western influence in a movement of 'Asia for Asiatics,' but by the expanded invasion of China in 1937, many African American intellectuals recognized Japan's expansion as self-serving, not a liberation movement. Citations from the writings of leading and lesser-known

⁵ See Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

African American writers indicate the diversity of opinions, but also the optimism with which many regarded Japan.

Marcus Garvey, founder of the United Negro Improvement Association, viewed the Japanese, not as savior of the non-white races, but as an exemplar of how African Americans could free themselves from oppression and determine their own destinies. Garvey mentions a portion of his opinions on Japan in his "Course of African Philosophy," a month long training session in the fall of 1937 for select members of the UNIA, from which remains a set of twenty two written lessons.⁶ In his text on 'Black Nationalism' for a lesson on the "Aims and Objects of the U.N.I.A.," Garvey tried to dissuade those who believe a Japanese victory in Asia would ultimately improve conditions for African Americans in the United States:

Never think that if Japan gains control of the world, they will treat you better than Anglo-Saxons or Latins....All other races and nations will use you just the same; as slaves and underdogs. Therefore, your only protection is to have your own government. Don't encourage Negroes to join Japanese, Chinese, Indian, or any other movements with the hope of getting greater freedom. They will never get it, because all peoples want all things for themselves.⁷

While Garvey believed that Japanese prominence in the international scene was based on self-interest, he established Japanese progress as a way for African Americans to similarly exert themselves in their own self-serving actions. He continued with this theme of the Japanese as a model later in the same lesson writing: "don't allow the other nations to get ahead of you in anything. Follow the idea of the Japanese. Every ship the other races build the Japanese build one. Every university the other races build for teaching men, the Japanese build one. Do the same. Always have your own because there will not be enough to accommodate you later on. Create your own. Every Japanese you see is working for the good of his nation."⁸ As indicated in Garvey's writings, he did not mistake Japanese ambitions as a way of liberating African Americans from Jim Crow segregation and

⁶ Marcus Garvey, *Message to the People: The Course of African Philosophy*, ed. Tony Martin (Dover, MA: The Majority Press, 1986), xv-xvi.

⁷ Ibid., 34-35.

⁸ Ibid., 36.

discrimination, but as a way for African Americans to free themselves from such racial barriers. His admiration for the Japanese stemmed from their ability to run their own country and affairs as a separate and distinct people, which seems appropriate given his desire to create Liberia as a homeland for Africans from the Diaspora.

In 1935, Garvey also wrote a fictional dialogue between a father and son for the British publication *Black Man* indicating his impression of the Japanese empire in a global context and what it meant for African Americans:

FATHER: My son, you should hold up your head and be as proud as any other boy in the world. The English boy wants to be Prime Minister of England, the French boy wants to be President of France, the American white boy wants to be President of the United States. You, my boy, and all other black boys should have a similar ambition for a country of your own.

SON: Is that the reason why, father, the Japanese refuse to accept the leadership of Western civilization?

FATHER: That is so. The Japanese are a proud people. They are of the yellow race and they feel that they should develop a civilization of their own, and so they have their own Empire, their own Prime Minister, their own Ambassadors, their own Army and Navy. They have a Japanese Empire.

SON: But can the Negro have an Empire, father?

FATHER: Yes, my son. It is difficult to-day, for him to have a political Empire, because the world is almost taken up by the white and yellow races.⁹

The responses of the father indicate a level of respect for the Japanese and their capacity to create a national identity separate from Western civilization, but also suggest jealousy for the ability of the Japanese to establish their own empire when African Americans and Africans themselves faced discrimination and colonization. While Garvey obviously maintains some interest in Japanese political developments, he conforms to the common practice, as Dower addresses in *War Without Mercy*, of associating European fascism with specific leaders and parties, while, at the same time, generalizes when referring to the Japanese: “so Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and the Japanese political leaders are leaving humanity at large with an indelible mark of their political disposition.”¹⁰ Garvey’s works indicate that while he saw the

⁹ Marcus Garvey, “A Dialogue: What’s the Difference?” *Black Man* I, no. 7 (June 1935): 10-12 in *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons, A Centennial Companion to The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, ed. Robert A. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 146-147.

¹⁰ Marcus Garvey, *Black Man* 3, no. 10 (July 1938): 3 in *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons*, lvii-lviii; Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 78-79.

Japanese as role models for African Americans and Africans, he perceived a distance between their actions and events that could end discrimination and colonization for people of color.

W.E.B. Du Bois remains one of the most active African American intellectuals in writing about his perceptions of the Japanese Empire during the 1930s. His belief in solidarity along the global color line influenced his recognition of Japan's imperialism as something completely different from Western imperialism. In 1935, Du Bois published "Inter-Racial Implications of the Ethiopian Crisis: A Negro View," an article relating international affairs to Italian aggression in Ethiopia. Commenting on Japan's role in the world scene, Du Bois wrote, "Such was the situation at the time of the World War. The war brought about revolution of thought in regard to race relations. Japan, instead of being regarded as the exception, came to be looked upon as heralding a new distribution of world power."¹¹

Contemporaries and modern historians observe him as an apologist for Japanese violence, through his attempts to excuse Japanese aggression and imperial actions as an attempt to create a new world order. His 1935 article indicates this justification: "Japan is regarded by all colored peoples as their logical leader, as the one non-white nation which has escaped forever the dominance and exploitation of the white world. No matter what Japan does or how she does it, excuse leaps to the lips of colored thinkers."¹² His explanation stemmed from the respect he held for the Japanese in their struggle to succeed in a Western dominated world, opening the way for other peoples of color to do the same: "The accomplishment of Japan has been to realize the meaning of European aggression on the darker peoples, to discover the secret of the white man's power, and then without revolutionary violence is change her whole civilization [sic] and attitude toward the world, so

¹¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Inter-Racial Implications of the Ethiopian Crisis: A Negro View," *Foreign Affairs* 14 (October 1935): 82-92 in *Writings by W.E.B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others* Vol. 3, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1982), 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

as to emerge in the twentieth century the equal in education, technique, health, industry and art of any nation on earth.”¹³

In addition to these assertions, Du Bois conveyed his belief that Japan was unjustly targeted by racism in the world context. He argued that Japan’s expansion into Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria was the same as European and American imperialism, but with one key difference:

Her program cannot be one based on race hate for the conquered, since racially these latter are one with the Japanese and are recognized as blood relatives. Their eventual assimilation, the accord of social equality to them, will present no real problem. White dominance under such circumstances would carry an intensification of racial differences. Conquest and exploitation are brute facts of the present era, yet if they must come, is it better that they come from members of your own or other races?¹⁴

He maintained, throughout most of the 1930s, that Japan’s “protection” of East Asian societies was preferable to European domination and would ultimately lead to greater prosperity for all those involved. As early as 1933, Du Bois wrote of a united Asia, focusing on a mutual peace between China and Japan, with the ability to “drive Europe out of Asia and let her get her own raped and distracted house in order. Let the yellow and brown race, nine hundred million strong take their rightful leadership of mankind.”¹⁵

Du Bois also asserted the “tremendous advantage” Japan held because of its independent economy: “She need beg neither Wall or Lombard Street for capital. She has her own engineers and technicians. Above all, she has a labor force that can live in contentment and health at twenty-five cents a day per family. Consequently, she is beating the commercial world today, and underselling every nation in the world markets.”¹⁶ He projected that the expansion of Japanese capital and industry in China and the extensive worldwide distribution of Japanese goods would make the global market dependent on

¹³ W.E.B. Du Bois, “What Japan Has Done,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 20, 1937 in *W.E.B. Du Bois on Asia: Crossing the World Color Line*, ed. Bill V. Mullen and Cathryn Watson, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 78.

¹⁴ Du Bois, “Inter-Racial Implications,” 20.

¹⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Listen Japan and China,” *Crisis*, V. 40, n. 1 (1933) in Mullen, *W.E.B. Du Bois on Asia*, 74.

¹⁶ Du Bois, “What Japan Has Done,” 78-79.

Japan and raise its status among nations. Du Bois's focus was entirely on the competitiveness of the Japanese economy in the global market, contrasting sharply with the Communist viewpoint emphasizing the allegedly harmful effects of Japanese economic policy on Japanese society, especially the working class.

Several intellectuals and journalists drew a connection between Ethiopia and Japan as the two major nonwhite societies which had been able to withstand the domination of European and American imperialism. When Italy began to encroach upon the sanctity of Ethiopian independence, many African American elites hoped that Japan would fulfill its claim to be the 'champion of the darker peoples' by protecting Ethiopia, or at least formally opposing Italian expansion. George Padmore, an intellectual who would later advocate Pan-Africanism, espoused this celebration of victory over Western imperialism in *The Crisis* stating, "the Ethiopians and the Japanese are the only two colonial nations which have ever defeated the white powers at arms."¹⁷ Japan's failure to halt Italian expansion, and its eventual alliance with the fascist state, disappointed many African Americans and was used as a propaganda point by Communist intellectuals. In 1938, the Negro Commission of the National Committee of the Communist Party, USA published a pamphlet entitled "Is Japan the Champion of the Colored Races?: The Negro's Stake in Democracy," which characterized, among several other issues, Japan's betrayal of Ethiopia: "Everybody now knows that Japan's rulers did not lift a finger to help the heroic Ethiopian people. On the contrary, the Japanese government sabotaged every move designed to hinder the fascist aggressors and to aid the Ethiopian people."¹⁸ The pamphlet extended this idea of a betrayal in an effort to show Japan's real intentions and actions in juxtaposition with its rhetoric: "thus we have the spectacle of the 'protector' of the darker peoples not only endorsing the rape of Ethiopia but inspiring that rape by its own lawless adventures in the

¹⁷ George Padmore, "Ethiopia and World Politics," *The Crisis* (May, 1935), 157 in Vijay Prashad, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 28.

¹⁸ Negro Commission of the National Committee of the Communist Party, USA, *Is Japan the Champion of the Colored Races?: The Negro's Stake in Democracy* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1938), 20.

Far East.”¹⁹ African American Communists quite accurately perceived the ulterior motives in Japanese foreign policy and its attempt to court the peoples of color worldwide.

Long after Ethiopia had been invaded, some African Americans continued to defend the actions of Japan. Harry Frederick, Executive Vice President of Pioneer Negroes of America and “well-known ‘soapbox’ orator” according to *The New York Amsterdam Star News*, continued to praise the actions of Japan as late as October 1941. Yet, his stance can be regarded as extreme given his portrayal of Hitler as “the black man’s greatest friend because he’s chopping the heads off these great imperialistic white nations.”²⁰ He portrayed Japan’s expansion as “taking her rightful place in the Asiatic sun, because of this Nazi dictator. Asia will be for the Asiatics after this war, no matter what white side wins.”²¹ Frederick supported the Axis powers believing that their struggles would ultimately help African Americans by disrupting the existing social and political order. This hope for a change in the social order of the United States by African Americans was first laid in Japan’s promises for a new world order. Throughout the war, African Americans considered their positions in the United States when constructing perceptions of the Japanese, such as the eventual Double V campaign defining the Japanese as the enemy in an attempt to win the war for democracy and equality at home and abroad.

African American intellectuals also wrote commentary on the Japanese as a society from their viewpoints within the United States. Some of this contact was through Japanese immigration and the interaction between African Americans and Japanese Americans on the West Coast. Also prevalent at this time were Black Asiatic societies, such as the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World, which often had Japanese representatives traveling around the country with a message of Japanese-African American solidarity. Based on these interactions and scholarship on Japan, several intellectuals expounded on their impressions

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Harry Frederick, “Is Adolf Hitler the Negro’s Enemy?” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 11, 1941.

²¹ Ibid.

of Japan. These judgments, with the official Communist stance excluded, were sympathetic to a Japanese society facing racial stereotypes and discrimination on the world stage.

The pamphlet, "Is Japan The Champion of the Colored Races?" released by the Negro Commission of the Communist Party, critiqued the capitalist economy of Japan for its arrival "at their 'place in the sun' as a result of the most shameful betrayals of their colored neighbors on the Asiatic mainland, and of the frightful oppression, poverty and suffering of the majority of the Japanese people."²² The official Communist discussion focused on the concentration of wealth and economic power in the elite and the low position of peasants and working class citizens in society. The pamphlet criticized position of the elite *zaibatsu* stating:

Finance capital in Japan, as in every imperialist country, rules through the monopoly of the big banks, and through its control of industry, agriculture, and foreign trade. Economic control of the country is largely concentrated in the hands of the so-called Big Five Banks, behind which stand the great banking families, the Mitsui and the Mitsubishi. These bankers, controlling thousands of undertakings, occupy the key position in the economic life of Japan, enriching themselves at the expense of millions of peasants, workers, and petty tradesmen.²³

The *zaibatsu* were discussed throughout the piece for their exploitations of working class individuals indicating that even "small and medium-sized [industrial] establishments" and "peasant home industry [were] exploited by the landlords, merchants and loan-sharks.... The Japanese money lords have succeeded in combining under the cloak of an absolute monarchy the most up-to-date forms of twentieth century wage-slavery, with a primitive plundering of the masses reminiscent of the Middle Ages."²⁴

In addition to their critique of the *zaibatsu*, the Communist pamphlet related statistics and assertions to show the poor living conditions of Japanese peasants and working class laborers. The plight of Japanese farmers was compared to the repressive sharecropping policies, which adversely affected many African Americans: "The starvation rent-in kind, a sort of sharecropping system similar to that practiced in own Southern States, deprives the

²² Negro Commission of the Communist Party USA, *Is Japan the Champion*, 11.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

peasants of two-thirds of their crops. Oppressive taxes and interest payments add to this burden.”²⁵ Japanese women were said to have the burden of most of the industrialization: daughters sold into “brothels and cotton mills,” women and children employed in “spinning and weaving industry,” and “majority of women wage-workers” earning only one-twelfth of the average amount earned by “the average American industrial worker.”²⁶ In their analysis, the Negro Commission questioned the ability of the Japanese to provide democratic ideals and enlightenment to their protectorate societies, and thus by extension, the nonwhite world at large.

Ralph Bunche, Nobel Peace Prize winner and political scientist discussed the Japanese in an attempt to refute racial stereotypes in his 1936 pamphlet, *A World View of Race*. Bunche set out to discredit the preconceived idea of Japanese stature, an image that continued through the war and was often portrayed in American propaganda. In comparing the stereotypic notions of the Japanese and Norwegians, Bunche stated, “there is great variety in the stature of the members of both groups and much is overlapping. Thus there would be many Japanese who would be found to be taller than many Norwegians.... It cannot be assumed that because a man is a Japanese he must be short, or that a particular North European will be tall.”²⁷ During the time when American anthropologists and scientists were still attempting to determine the basis for race and eugenicists were discussing racial hierarchies and attempting to improve the human race through selective breeding, Bunche sought to reshape racial misconceptions. His discussion of Japanese height strove to humanize and further develop the conception of the Japanese in the mind of Americans as more than the image of myopic, monkey-men that prevailed during World War II.

Bunche also discussed the nativism among Americans towards immigrants of varying descents, including Japanese immigrants to the West Coast, and the ensuing

²⁵ Ibid., 13.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ralph Bunche, *A World View of Race* (1936; repr., Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1968), 6.

Immigration Act of 1924 banning all immigration from Japan, among other Asian nations. He extolled the virtues of Japanese immigrants and subsequent resentment from native-born Americans:

They [the Japanese immigrants] were too thrifty; they worked too hard; they saved too much; they were too independent; and much too aggressive. They liked too well their own farms and businesses. They soon came into violent economic competition with the small farmer, petty merchant, and working classes. So it was necessary to invoke the 'yellow peril,' and anti-Japanese feeling developed rapidly. Like the Chinese earlier, the Japanese were then brutally and unjustly treated and eventually excluded from the country by law.²⁸

Bunche understood the similar position of Japanese Americans as second-class citizens purposely discriminated against to reduce competition for Caucasian business owners, workers, and homeowners. This legacy of shared discrimination made Bunche more sympathetic to the plight of Japanese immigrants and possibly the Japanese people in general by extension.

During the 1930s and 40s, the Nation of Islam and several of its leaders shared an interesting connection with Japan through Afro-Asian societies, such as the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World and the Society for the Development of Our Own. Even after the beginning of the war in China and U.S. entry after Pearl Harbor, they believed that a Japanese victory over the United States would result in better conditions for Muslims and African Americans. Wallace Fard, the founder of Nation of Islam, portrayed himself as an "Asiatic black man" although his origins were indeterminate.²⁹ After being released from jail in 1933, Fard disseminated the belief that Japan had built a "Mother Plane" and that "when he gave the signal, the airship would release smaller ships inside its bay that would drop poison bombs on America. Only 144,000 people would survive, and all of those would be Muslims of color, the only 'true' Muslims."³⁰ Elijah Muhammad also preached about a Japanese liberation of Black Muslims: "The Japanese will slaughter the white man" and "it is

²⁸ Ibid., 72.

²⁹ Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 73.

³⁰ Ibid., 96.

Japan's duty to save you; they have been given the power of the Asiatic nation to save you in the West."³¹ Muhammad, arrested in 1942 for evading the draft, continued to promulgate the future deliverance of African American Muslims in sermons: "You shouldn't fear the devil when he tells you that you must go and fight in this war. You should refuse to fight.... The newspapers are lying when they say that the Japanese are losing. We are going to win."³² His sermons, recorded by FBI operatives, were submitted to the court as evidence during his draft evasion trial:

The Asiatic race is made up of all dark-skinned people, including the Japanese and the Asiatic black man. Therefore, members of the Asiatic race must stick together. The Japanese will win the war because the white man cannot successfully oppose the Asiatics.³³

Malcolm X also attempted to avoid military service, claiming he was "frantic to join the Japanese Army."³⁴ The rhetoric of the Nation of Islam showed the persisting vision through the 1930s that the Japanese were kindred of African Americans as people of color and their hope that the Japanese, in their position of power, would assist their "lost brothers" in raising their status.

A few African American intellectuals and artists articulated their impressions of Japan from their visits to the country itself and their interaction with Japanese people. Despite their varying experiences and terms of stay in Japan, most of African American experiences praised their treatment by Japanese civilians, but had varying opinions of the Japanese government itself. Buck Clayton, a noted Jazz musician, briefly visited Japan in the mid 1930s during his voyage to Shanghai, China on a Dollar Line ship. In his autobiography, Clayton described his experiences in Japan:

When we were in Japan we were the only ones allowed to disembark. All the white passengers had to remain aboard while the ship was in dock while we Blacks were allowed to go ashore and have a ball. We could come and go as we pleased as long as we didn't miss the boat when it prepared to leave. We went ashore at Kobe,

³¹ Ibid., 106.

³² Ibid., 144.

³³ Ibid., 145.

³⁴ George Lipsitz, "'Frantic to Join... the Japanese Army': The Asia Pacific War and the Lives of African American Soldiers and Civilians," in *Perilous Memories: The Asia Pacific War(s)*, ed by Takashi Fujitani (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 347.

Yokohama, and Nagasaki, and I must admit at times it was pretty hard to go back to the boat, especially after being in Kobe. There was really some pretty attractions there, all of them about four feet tall.³⁵

Clayton's narrative demonstrates a unique Japanese attempt to show solidarity with African Americans through reverse Jim Crow regulations, but also rearticulates the stereotype Bunche was attempting to refute.

In 1936, W.E.B. Du Bois also visited Japan, but his tour was more prolonged and officially arranged by Hikida Yasuichi, a 'young Japanese student' who was probably an agent for Imperial Japan.³⁶ News reporters and representatives of the Japanese Tourist Bureau met Du Bois at the ship's gangplank upon his arrival in Nagasaki; the next day, officials of the Japanese Foreign Office accompanied him to Kobe. The photographs of Du Bois in Japan on page 18 indicate the quite formal, orchestrated nature of his visit. Du Bois, described some of his impressions of Japan "through the loose veil of [a] fictional biography," but published after the war, he was more critical of the Japanese Empire than when his original articles and correspondence had been published in the mid 1930s.³⁷ Du Bois commented on his arrival in Japan stating:

Across the straits Mansart [Du Bois's pseudonym in the work] hurried to Japan, the one colored nation whose talent, industry and military might the white West feared. He looked on the island mountains with intense curiosity. He sensed a difference immediately. In China he had received every courtesy and yet he knew that China felt itself part of a white world and planned its future as part of that world. No sooner had he set foot in Japan than he felt himself in a colored nation who hated the white world just as he, despite all effort, did himself. He was received almost as a fellow-citizen.³⁸

Having just traveled through Europe and Russia, Du Bois welcomed the chance to be in a 'colored country': "Casually, if I woke up suddenly in Japan, I should imagine myself among New Orleans or Charleston mulattoes."³⁹ Du Bois's biographer, David Levering Lewis, asserts that despite his idealism when touring Japan and his warm reception by various

³⁵ Buck Clayton, *Buck Clayton's Jazz World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 66-67.

³⁶ David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 390.

³⁷ Mullen, *W.E.B. Du Bois on Asia*, 61.

³⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Color of Asia," in *Worlds of Color: The Black Flame: A Trilogy*, (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization, Ltd, 1961), 62-70 in Mullen, *W.E.B. Du Bois on Asia*, 96-97.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.



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⁴⁰ "Du Bois, W.E.B., and hosts, Japan, 1936," photographs, 1936, University of Massachusetts Amherst Special Collections and University Archives, Amherst, MA.

Japanese intellectuals Du Bois was “not blinded”:

Du Bois was perturbed the conformity of Japanese culture. Shintoism transformed into a modern ethic of emperor-worship yielded impressive results in terms of order, solidarity, and activism, yet he readily discerned the underlying inhospitality to criticism, to deviant ideas, to alien practices. State Shinto hampered ‘freedom of spirit and expression,’ he conceded. His journal entry was somewhat more critical: “There is poverty in Japan; there is oppression; there is no democratic freedom.”⁴¹

While Du Bois did have critiques of Japanese culture and society, he remained a supporter of their ability to succeed in the modern world despite the disadvantages of their skin color.

Du Bois’s reaction to his reception in Japan was quite similar to those African Americans who occupied Japan following World War II; their feelings of finally being accepted into a society as equals created lasting positive opinions of the Japanese in the context of American discrimination.

Langston Hughes also traveled to Japan while on a world tour in 1937. He chronicled his experiences extensively in his travel autobiography, *I Wonder As I Wander*, and reported the strong dichotomy between his visits to Japan before and after a trip to Mainland China. Hughes arrived at Tsuruga on the western coast of Japan’s main island, Honshu, and stayed with a couple of Australians at a “charming inn where guests took off their shoes at the door, but where there was one wing with European furnishings, chairs and beds on legs for Occidental travelers.” Hughes and the Australian travelers were visited by the police, who “inspected our papers and asked why we had been in Russia, how long, and for what good reason. They were very polite and did not linger, but as one questioned us the other took down everything we said.”⁴² The ship captain of their voyage to Japan offered to take Hughes and his male Australian companion to a geisha house in Kyoto:

The Australian thought the geishas were prostitutes. But I assured him that I had heard they *definitely were not*, and should not be treated as such. I did not want my companion to commit a faux pas and embarrass me. He didn’t. Both of us sat through several hours at the geisha house in squat-legged silence, as the Japanese captain seemed to glow with enjoyment. Three very delicate and prettily kimonoed little girls were shoed gracefully into our large, airy private room which was covered

⁴¹ Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 417.

⁴² Langston Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander*, ed. Joseph McLaren (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 240-241.

with mats on the floor. Tea things were brought, and the girls played three-stringed *samisens* (sic) and zitherlike instruments. One their knees, they poured tea charmingly....There was nothing at all sensuous or wild or even mildly flirtatious about the evening. It was quite charming and quiet and—for the two of us from America and Australia—most conducive to sleep after the first half hour.⁴³

Hughes described Kyoto as “the oldest and most beautiful of Japanese cities.” “The brightly lighted streets of Kyoto looked like a child’s dream of a marionette theater fair—very clean, very pretty, and very impersonal—very *Japanese* rather than really Oriental.” Hughes found the sites of Kyoto “visually charming,” but he regarded the city “as impersonal as a Technicolor movie.”⁴⁴

Hughes then traveled to Tokyo, and enjoyed a few days of rest in anonymity. Asking the Imperial Hotel desk clerk how to get to Tsukiji Theater, the clerk responded suggesting that he should go to see kabuki instead. Hughes related that “the clerk told me how to get to the Tsukiji, but he no doubt also told the police where I was going.” Hughes may have misinterpreted the subtle attempt of the clerk to have him avoid police scrutiny because the theater was considered “a center of left-wing activities, pacifist, and opposed to the current Japanese invasion of China.”⁴⁵ Hughes was warmly welcomed to the theater as the first African American writer to visit. After this, his presence in Tokyo was revealed and several Japanese writers, actors, artists, and newspaper reporters arrived at his hotel to meet with him and escort him around the city. Invited to a performance at the Kabuki Theater, Hughes was quite impressed with the theater itself:

Since performances lasted for hours, the hippodromeline building housing the Kabuki had at least a dozen restaurants and tearooms on various levels. Patrons could put in a order before an act, and return to dine at the next intermission. There was an eel room, a European room, a Chinese restaurant, a buckwheat room, several cafés with distinct styles of cooking and serving—the *sushi*, *benmatsu*, *shiruko*. There were fruit nooks, tea parlors, tobacco stands and smoking rooms, a barbershop, a photographer’s studio, a playroom for children, and an emergency room with a nurse in attendance. I have never anywhere in the world seen so well-equipped a theater.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid., 241.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 242.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 243.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 246.

Hughes's commentary shows a level of appreciation for Japanese culture and society. He seems to regard it at a distance and does not speak of the warm reception that Du Bois focused on in his commentary.

Hughes departed from Japan to China for a trip to Shanghai, but his return trip to San Francisco had layovers in Kobe and Yokohama. Each time, Hughes attempted to go ashore, he was interrogated about his visit to China, while all of the other passengers merely had to show their identification; both times however he was eventually permitted to go ashore. In Kobe, Hughes ran across two American seamen who showed him around "all the hot spots of town" and then spent the evening in a "noisy and very lively pavilion that seemed to be a kind of combination dance hall, shooting gallery, bar and sea food grill all under one roof" in the company of "three vivacious reed thin Japanese girls, with American-styled bobbed hair."⁴⁷ From Yokohama, Hughes returned to Tokyo for a few days during the layover; the same night, two Japanese gentlemen in European dress and a "much smaller man in a black and gray kimono," who was Tokunaga Sunao, the celebrated Japanese author of the novel, *The Sunless Street* (*Taiyou no nai michi*) visited Hughes at his hotel. The two men, police officers who had not identified themselves as such, began questioning Hughes about his affiliations with various left wing American authors. Hughes realized from the questions the true identity of the two men and that Tokunaga was their prisoner:

Never good at concealing what I am thinking, I am sure this realization must have shown in my face at once, and all three of the men sitting there knew what I thought. The pale little writer in the kimono smiled wanly as if to indicate he was relieved that I had found out I was the center of a police trap. The Japanese gentlemen in European clothing, who looked like fat spiders, turned the conversation away from literary personalities.⁴⁸

Eventually the "conversation" ended and the two men left with Tokunaga between them.

The next morning, Hughes was escorted to the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Headquarters for an interrogation; he was told repeatedly that he was not under arrest, but they would nonetheless not let him leave police custody. The police officers asked him a

⁴⁷ Ibid., 259-260.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 261-262.

variety of questions relating to his travel in Russia, China, and Japan; his affiliation with Tsukiji Theater; and his opinion of the Japanese. Hughes also related his interpretation of what African Americans thought of the Japanese during the era:

Interviewer: What do the Negroes in America think of Japan?

Hughes: Some do not think anything at all. Some think Japan might be the savior of the darker peoples of the world. And others who have had some contacts with Japanese in the United States think quite otherwise, since they believe that the Japanese there do not care to associate with Negroes. The Japanese in America don't suffer all the inconveniences we do, so I can understand why they might not want to be identified with us—and perhaps Jim Crowed as a result.

Interviewer: Japan is trying to make Asia free of that Jim Crow you speak of, which the white nations have imported here. You said in your speech at the Pan Pacific Club last month that you were glad of Japan being able to drink tea without domination. Would that not be good for all the rest of Asia?

Hughes: Of course, it would be good. Certainly! But for your country or any other Asiatic country to make colonies of other people's lands in Asia, that would not be good.

Interviewer: You do not understand Japan.⁴⁹

Hughes was eventually released from police custody, but one officer informed him, “you are a *persona non grata* in Japan, and the police request that you please go home. Meanwhile do not speak with or communicate with any Japanese citizens in Tokyo. You will leave as soon as possible, and I inform you that you are *not* to return to Japan.”⁵⁰ Returning to the hotel, *New York Times* reporter Stanley Wood interviewed Hughes and informed him that all of the writers who had arrived at a luncheon to be held in Hughes's honor had been arrested and were still detained by the police. In the interview, Hughes said, “I considered my

⁴⁹ Ibid., 264-265. Hughes's sentiments about the disassociation of some Japanese people in the United States with African Americans echo the earlier sentiments of Mary Church Terrell in her autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World*. She detailed her conversation with Baron Kanda Naibe at the Washington Naval Conference in 1921: “I discussed with him the attitude which the Japanese usually assume toward colored people in this country. As a rule, I told him, the Japanese avoid colored people and seem unfriendly toward them. I explained that, personally, I felt that I could understand the reason why Japanese in the United States hold themselves aloof from colored people. As soon as they reach this country, they learn that in many parts of the United States colored people are debarred from hotels and restaurants, are denied privileges accorded to other people and nearly everywhere they are socially ostracized. Under the circumstances, I admitted, it is quite natural that the Japanese, who have troubles of their own when they reach the United States, should not want to be closely affiliated with a group which is generally regarded as inferior and considered undesirable in the social circles of the dominant race. Baron Kanda immediately assured me that in their own country the Japanese have absolutely no prejudice against colored people. They know very little about them, of course, he said, but when colored people are among them they are received with the same cordiality as that extended to other races.” Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 340.

⁵⁰ Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander*, 269-270.

treatment as a tourist disgraceful, and that such behavior on the part of the Tokyo police indicated that Japan was headed down the same path as Hitler's Germany," but in his autobiography admitted "inside myself, I really did not mind being put out of Japan since I was headed home, anyhow."⁵¹ The next two days, Hughes was allowed to travel around the city, but with police escort and was accompanied to the *Taiyo Maru* in Yokohama to make sure he departed Japan properly.⁵² Hughes experiences in Japan and introduction to Japanese culture were obviously tarnished through his experiences with the restrictive Japanese police. While his interactions with Japanese people on an individual, personal level seemed positive, his ultimate support for the Chinese after the Japanese invasion of Mainland China is not at all surprising.

During the 1930s, African American intellectuals varied greatly in their impressions of the Japanese from their viewpoints in the United States and from firsthand experiences in Japan. Black Internationalists vicariously followed the success of Japan in world affairs since their victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. The view of the Japanese as role models and potential saviors for peoples of color worldwide was most prevalent surrounding the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy. African American leaders in the Communist Movement used Japan's "betrayal" of Ethiopia and poverty juxtaposed with wealthy elite as evidence of Japan's self-interest and inability of the Japanese to liberate African Americans from discrimination and destitution. Within the U.S., some African Americans had contact with Japanese immigrants and agents of Black Asiatic societies, which altered their perception of the Japanese abroad. Visits to Japan by influential African American intellectuals had varied results; overall, it generated critiques of the conservatism and overpowering influence of the Japanese government in the lives of the Japanese people. Despite these perceived shortcomings in Japanese society, most African Americans portrayed them as role models for their ability to confront the existing global standard and act as a harbinger of hope for all

⁵¹ Ibid., 270-271.

⁵² Ibid., 272-273.

people of color, until their atrocities against fellow Asians in China proved Japan's expansion for self interest.

Chapter 2: Japan's Invasion of China and the Pacific War

Before the war, African American viewpoints of the Japanese tended to be positive assessments regarding their progress as a nation despite the restraints of the global color line. These views however must somehow become reconfigured between the mid 1930s and African American support for the war effort with the Double V campaign after U.S. entry into the war. Dower points to pre-existing racisms within the United States to describe the demonization of the Japanese enemy, but this explanation does not account for the transition in African American viewpoints. Instead, African Americans transformed their perceptions based on the actions of the Japanese both in their invasion of China and their conduct during the war. The failure of the Japanese Empire to liberate the Chinese, who were instead oppressed and murdered, led to African American disenchantment with the idea of Japanese saviors fighting to protect other people of color. Servicemen in the Pacific during the war likewise became disillusioned with any possible Afro-Japanese alliance when faced with the brutality of combat, which showed no advantage for African Americans.

Japanese expansion into foreign territory began in earnest with the annexation of Formosa following the Sino Japanese War in 1895. Even after extending Japanese control into Korea and Manchuria in 1910 and 1931 respectively, African American intellectuals regarded Japan as a liberating force from white imperialist domination. Formosa, Korea, and Manchuria were being “protected” from possible exploitation by Western powers; in their opinion, Japan was making the demand of ‘Asia for Asiatics’ a reality. Japan’s renewed hostilities in 1937 with the invasion of Mainland China began to alter the perspective of many African American intellectuals who saw the plight of Chinese citizens firsthand, through newspaper accounts, or lectures. Not all African Americans believed the actions of the Japanese were irredeemable; a vocal section of the African American intelligentsia viewed Japan’s expanded war in China an extension of the ‘Asia for Asiatics’ policy and Western condemnation of it as a racist double standard. Although some key intellectuals still maintained hope that Japan would serve as a leader for the “colored races,” Japan’s

aggressive invasion of China in 1937 was largely viewed as indicative of Japan's opportunistic imperial desires, no different from those of the European powers. For many, identification with the Japanese began to shift to alignment with the Chinese, who they viewed as a people facing similar forms of oppression.

In the years leading up to World War II, the black press "was firmly established as a mass medium and forum for expression of the black people."⁵³ The 'Big Five' papers, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *New York Amsterdam News*, "represented a total average weekly circulation in 1944 of 740,282."⁵⁴ Among the 143 African American papers that were distributed during the war, the views of each columnist and editorialist varied in regard to his or her opinion of the expanded war in China.⁵⁵ While it appears that the black press did not extensively cover the details of Japanese atrocities in China, such as the invasion and massacre of civilians in Nanjing, many newspapers did carry some of the varied African American reactions to the expanded war.

Following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July of 1937 and the broader invasion of China, some reporters continued to support the Japanese expansionistic aims in Asia. In September 1937, after the invasion of Shanghai had commenced, Will Pickens, a columnist for the Associated Negro Press, continued to pledge his support for Japanese war aims. He believed that there was no need for outside intervention: "If Japan wins, it means the end of white domination in Asia tomorrow; if China wins, it means the end of white domination in Asia next week."⁵⁶ Pickens asserted that the war among Asian nations indicated the growing strength of each and their ultimate ability to dispel Western imperialists from exploiting the region. Another Associated Negro Press reporter, Gordon B. Hancock, as late as July 1938

⁵³ Lee Finkle, *Forum for Protest: The Black Press During World War II* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), 51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Will Pickens, "Commonsense in Diplomacy," Associated Negro Press Release, September 15, 1937 in Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 69.

“decried the double standard in perceptions of German and Italian aggression on the one hand, and Japanese on the other, attributed it to racial prejudice.”⁵⁷

In addition to these viewpoints supporting the Japanese invasion, other writers condemned the war citing its imperialistic nature as cruel and no different than Western imperialism. Alice Burke, a native of Richmond wrote an editorial entitled “The World Changes” in support of a lecture she attended on boycotting Japanese goods to save Chinese civilians:

I went to a meeting last night sponsored by the Consumer’s Boycott Against Japanese Aggression in China at which Dr. Frank N. Price of the University of Nanking urged Richmonders to boycott goods imported from Japan in this way to help China. Dr. Price maintained that there is no midle [sic] ground—either we buy goods and help Japan slaughter millions of innocents, especially children and women, or we refuse to buy anything made in Japan and thereby help the Chinese People.⁵⁸

Burke targets women in her editorial, by drawing attention to the fact that “each pair of silk hose you buy supplies Japan with enough foreign exchange to purchase four rounds of machine gun ammunition.” She thus proposes,

we should all make ourselves *a committee of one* to sepak [sic] to our friends and neighbors and enlist their aid in stopping the killing of innocent Chinese people. All clubs and organizations should urge their members to wear lisle and rayon hose, and to stop buying all Japanese made goods.... DEFEAT FASCISM—BEGIN AT HOME BY BOYCOTTING JAJANESE [sic], ITALIAN AND GERMAN MADE GOODS. DONE AT RANDOM.⁵⁹

Alice Burke’s encouragement to African American women to support a boycott in the domestic sphere shows how far reaching the news of atrocities against Chinese civilians extended and the disenchantment and even sense of betrayal many African Americans felt upon learning that Japan was merely pursuing its own economic and expansionist policies.

Frank Price, mentioned in Burke’s article, was a Protestant missionary serving in China and was part of the Theological Seminary at the University of Nanking. In 1938, he led the establishment of the China Information Service in Washington, D.C., which

⁵⁷ Gordon B. Hancock, “Another Gentlemen’s Agreement,” Associated Negro Press Release, July 6, 1938 in Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 69.

⁵⁸ Alice Burke, “The World Changes,” *Richmond Planet*, February 26, 1938.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

distributed mimeographed bulletins detailing Japanese atrocities in China and U.S. support of this invasion through the selling of war material to Japan.⁶⁰ The Committee for a Boycott Against Japanese Aggression was one of several national groups urging the refusal to purchase Japanese goods, most notably silk, in order to avoid unwittingly becoming “an innocent partner in Japanese aggression.”⁶¹ The early inclusion of African Americans in these national consumer boycotts shows the awareness of black purchasing power, which became one of the fundamental aspects of the Civil Rights Movement with the Montgomery Bus Boycotts and boycotts of Southern chain stores, such as Woolworth’s, which practiced Segregationist policies.

Many editorialists condemned Japanese expansion as being in league with Western imperialism and thus not a “‘defender’ of the ‘darker peoples.’”⁶² Cyril Briggs, editor of the Crusader News Agency, contended in his article, “‘Undeclared War’ With China Proves Nippon Has Joined With Europe’s Imperialistic Nations,” that contrary to their idealistic role, the Japanese had proven their reluctance to liberate peoples of color through their negligence of the Ethiopian people during the Italian invasion. Briggs believed that the Black Asiatic Movements were attempting to mislead African Americans from Japan’s true intentions:

The effects of this Japanese propaganda are clearly seen in the cases of Ethiopia and China. In the first, it held back at least some sections of our people from rendering active assistance to Ethiopia. In the case of China, it seeks to condone and justify Japan’s criminal attack on the Chinese people. It seeks to blind large sections of our people to the identity of our interests with the anti-imperialist national liberation struggle of the Chinese people.⁶³

Likewise, a *Pittsburgh Courier* article featured an address in Norfolk by Ben Davis, Jr. stating “Germany, Italy, Japan Not Friends of American Negro.” Davis, a lawyer and editor of the Communist publication *The Daily Worker*, disparaged those African Americans who still

⁶⁰ Paul A. Varg, *Missionaries, Chinese, and Diplomats: The American Protestant Missionary Movement in China, 1890-1952* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 260.

⁶¹ Lawrence B. Glickman, “‘Make Lisle the Style’: The Politics of Fashion in the Japanese Silk Boycott, 1937-1940” *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 573-608.

⁶² Cyril Briggs, “‘Undeclared War’ With China Proves Nippon Has Joined With Europe’s Imperialistic Nations,” *Richmond Planet*, January 22, 1938.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

looked to the Japanese with hope: "Contrary to what many believe, Mr. Davis said, Japan is not our friend, not the friend of the colored races. If they pillage the Chinese who are colored and akin to them, they cannot be a friend to the Negro."⁶⁴ Chatwood Hall, a foreign correspondent in Moscow for the *Chicago Defender*, reported in a similar fashion the effect of Japanese brutality on the Chinese war effort in February 1938:

United resistance to the invading enemy is beginning already to strain severely the human and economic resources of the Japanese militarists. Capture of Shanghai and the possible taking of Nankin [sic] in no way appreciably eases the burden on the invaders or means victory to them. Destruction of these Chinese cities, with the accompanying murder of thousands of men, women, and children only serves to raise to a still higher level the determination of the Chinese people to resist the enemy still more.⁶⁵

For many African Americans in the press, Japan's expanded war in China removed any doubt about Japan's self-seeking imperialistic actions and created an affiliation with the oppression of the Chinese.

Similar to the discussion by the black press, opinions of Japan within the African American intellectual community also varied in regards to the invasion of the Chinese Mainland. Much of the commentary related to Japan's role on the world stage in the context of its war on China. Harold Preece, in his *Crisis* article "A Labor Boycott for Peace," outlined the possible consequences of a boycott of Japanese goods:

Under the liberal interpretation of contemporary forces, we should not engage in boycotts against the present aggressors: Japan, Germany, and Italy. If our womenfolk stopped buying silk stockings, for instance, Japan would be severely handicapped in providing funds for the slaughter of Chinese peasants. This economic crippling of Japan might produce such a severe domestic crisis that the Japanese military caste would be swept from power and a democratic government installed at Tokio [sic]. On the other hand, so argue the spokesmen of absolute neutrality, Japan would become angry at us, thus increasing by the pompous bluffing of the democratic statesmen.⁶⁶

Preece continued with an admonition of democratic nations making concessions to Japanese aggression and warned that Russia might be the next object of Japan's desire:

⁶⁴ James H. Boykin, "Says Germany, Italy, Japan Not Friends of American Negro," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 26, 1938.

⁶⁵ Chatwood Hall, "Chinese Form United Front Against Japs," *Chicago Defender*, February 19, 1938.

⁶⁶ Harold Preece, "A Labor Boycott for Peace," *The Crisis*, February 1938, 42.

“the reluctance of democratic nations to take a definite stand, one way or the other, encourages Japan’s ambitions in China. After China, there is another rich prize to be divided between the international outlaws—Russia.”⁶⁷ He ultimately advocated a boycott of Japan by indicating how international trade capital benefited its war program alone: “money talks with capitalists of any country so that Japan will have little difficulty in getting whatever she needs from democratic nations. But impoverished China, fighting to retain her national sovereignty, must content herself with pious good wishes and ineffectual little tea-parties described politely as diplomatic conferences.”⁶⁸

W.E.B. Du Bois, long time advocater of the Japanese as role models for people of color, continued to support Japan even after the invasion of Mainland China, claiming that Japan was a victim of racism and Western pressure. Even as late as February 1941, Du Bois opposed U.S. intervention for China stating, “in this war, we are trying to attack Japan because of race prejudice and we are defending China not because we love the Chinese but because we want to exploit them.”⁶⁹ Du Bois continued to comment on issues other than Japanese aggression when discussing the causes of the Pacific War in *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace*, published in 1945. He ultimately attributed Japan’s militancy in Asia to the failure of Western nations to recognize Japan’s rightful place in world affairs:

But the world and Western civilization were not willing to receive Japan in complete partnership with recognition of racial equality of yellow peoples. The result of this, in the kaleidoscopic changes between the First World War and the Second, was that Japan after demanding racial equality in the League of Nations, and being rather peremptorily denied even theoretical confirmation by Great Britain and the United States, gradually turned and began to work toward hegemony in Asia. It was no longer a question of partnership with the West, but one of the domination of the major part of mankind by an Asiatic imperialism. When this imperialism made common cause with dictatorship in Germany and Italy, world war was inevitable.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Du Bois Says Stick to Education,” Fisk News (Nashville, TN: Fisk University, February 1941), 5 in Aptheker, *Writings by W.E.B. Du Bois*, 124.

⁷⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1945), 6.

Du Bois, thinking in terms of the global color line, placed the blame on Western inability to deal with peoples of color on an equal level.

Du Bois continued with this line of thinking by regarding the “attacking and dismembering [of] China as a beginning to her determination to supplant Europe and the United States as the colonial exploiter of Asia.”⁷¹ While by war’s end he acknowledged that Japan’s ultimate aim was to exploit, he precedes this concession with mentioning that Japan was “still smarting under European race prejudice and open contempt.”⁷² He expounded further on his views of European culpability in the Pacific war:

Thus in the Second World War there arose not simply the rivalry of European powers for imperial domination, but above and beyond this there looms the shadow of world conflict based on race and color, on the new determination of Japan to exploit Asia for herself, since Europe and the United States excluded her from partnership. A new Asiatic dream of imperialism has arisen, and also a new determination on the part of Europe never to surrender without world-wide raw materials, and in the prestige of world-wide technical leadership based on these advantages. The long fight between Japan and China, acquiesced in and even encouraged by Europe so long as the result might leave Asia open to European control, now suddenly takes on new complexion and new meaning when Japan’s real aim is clear and feasible.⁷³

Du Bois seems to condone nonwhite imperialism as better than white imperialism in Asia; even through exploitive tactics, Japan was making ‘Asia for Asiatics.’

Richard Wright also discusses viewpoints of Japan; however they are not his own. Active in the Communist Party at the time, it is probable that he held the anti-Japanese views advocated by the party’s official stance. He however makes note of some of the reactions to Japan’s war in China that he heard within the African American community.

I’ve even heard Negroes, in moments of anger and bitterness, praise what Japan is doing in China, not because they believe in oppression (being objects of oppression themselves), but because they would suddenly sense how empty their lives were when looking at the dark faces of Japanese generals in the rotogravure supplements of the Sunday paper. They would dream what it would be like to live in a country where they could forget their color and play a responsible role in the vital processes of the nation’s life.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid., 108-109.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Richard Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940) in Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 440.

Wright's explanation serves as an excellent reasoning for why some support for the Japanese continued after news of Japanese brutality in China reached mainstream American news. African Americans had no desire to see other people oppressed or exploited as the Japanese were doing in China, but simply desired the kind of freedom the Japanese had as a society to exercise their own will as a people. African Americans overall did not have a uniform viewpoint of the Japanese concerning the invasion of Mainland China. Even among the intelligentsia there was a diversity of opinions in support or admonition of Japan's expanded war in China.

Despite the range in African American opinions in the U.S. relating to the war in China, the few African Americans who happened to be in China during the rising hostilities were quite critical of Japan's aggression. Seeing the tensions between the Chinese and occupying Japanese soldiers, African Americans sympathized with the Chinese, who faced humiliations and harassment by the Japanese reminiscent of American South. While the Japanese might have claimed that they were liberating the Chinese from the Western spheres of influence, those African Americans living or visiting China could recognize what was really occurring.

Jazz musician Buck Clayton was touring China with his band as tensions rose in 1937. While enjoying their time overseas, his band "was pretty careful to save our fare back home."⁷⁵ His main apprehension rested with the Japanese Army, which was "becoming more and more open in their contempt for the Chinese government."⁷⁶ In his autobiography, Clayton later recalled some of the harassments of the Chinese people that he had witnessed while in Shanghai. He stated that the Japanese soldiers "would hold maneuvers early in the morning right in the middle of the main streets of Shanghai. One morning they were having

⁷⁵ Buck Clayton, *Buck Clayton's Jazz World*, 77-78.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

firing-range practice and the target was the Chinese flag.”⁷⁷ Clayton detailed another incident:

As I was coming out of a nightclub, the Venus, I saw a squadron of Japanese soldiers holding maneuvers in the street and they sneaked up on a car that had a little Chinese fellow in it. The little guy was so afraid that he couldn't make a move. The soldiers used the car as if it were a shield and pushed it down the street with the little guy still in it. They pushed it for about a quarter of a mile and ran over and hid behind a wall. They were having real maneuvers in the city and I could see that before long the real thing was going to happen.⁷⁸

Clayton was alerted to the Japanese disrespect for Chinese civilians and could see the impending brutality that coincided with Japan's invasion. He was able to return to the U.S. before hostilities commenced, but later noted “less than two weeks after we left the Japanese sailed a warship right down the middle of Shanghai and bombarded the city on both sides... I later learned that Jonesy [his bass player who remained behind] had been put in a concentration camp and had suffered many physical torments.”⁷⁹ Through such close familiarity with Japanese brutalities in China, Clayton's fond memories of visiting Japan during his voyage to China must have been altered.

Langston Hughes, visiting China in the late 1930s, also encountered the unpredictability of the Japanese army in China. He stated very matter-of-factly in his published travel accounts: “I went by train to Nanking to see Sun Yat-sen's Tomb in the Purple Mountains near the famous Ming lions, dragons and camels, overlooking the city. I wished very much to go to Peking, too, but it was not possible due to the Japanese armies, who sometimes allowed trains to pass, and sometimes not.”⁸⁰ Despite the straightforward, unemotional tone in his recollections, Hughes later wrote a poem for *The New Masses* in February 1938 entitled “Roar China!” Hughes supported the liberation of China from all aggressors, Western or Eastern:

Roar, China!
Roar, old lion of the East!

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Langston Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander*, 257.

Snort fire, yellow dragon of the Orient,
 Tired at last of being bothered...
 Even the yellow men came
 To take what the white men
 Hadn't already taken.
 The yellow men dropped bombs on Chapei.
 The yellow men called you the same names
 The white men did:
Dog! Dog! Dog!
*Coolie dog!*⁸¹

Hughes, based on his near deportation from Japan for his liberal politics, quite obviously supported the Chinese in their attempt to protect their national sovereignty.

Earl Whaley, a Seattle jazz musician who began touring China in 1934, was one of several African American musicians interned after the Japanese seized Shanghai in 1937. While few sources cover the details of his experiences in Japanese captivity, the *Pittsburgh Courier* featured Whaley's story upon his return to the U.S. in 1945:

Mr. Whaley stated that life in the civilian camps was quite different from the brutalities and atrocities assertedly suffered by prisoners in military camps. At Weihsien, he said, the internees set up their governing bodies, which included church, housing, working, and recreation committees. He reported that while the food was comparatively poor, the Japanese interfered very little in their daily routines and were not unduly mean or vicious. In China, he said, there was no distinction because of a person's color and discrimination because of race was virtually unknown.⁸²

Paul De Barros, in his history of jazz in Seattle, *Jackson Street After Hours*, cites that "according to one account, his hands were broken when he became defiant with his captors" and while a prisoner, Whaley served as an interpreter in the camp.⁸³ Palmer Johnson, a member of Whaley's band had been able to get out of Shanghai in time before the city fell. He later described his attempt to get out of the city:

I had been watching these Japs, riding around the main road in these little tanks.
 They were gathering troops to go to war. I says, I don't want none of this. I started
 going to the jai alai games to win my fare back. I want to get the hell out of there. So
 I read this paper, it said "'President Grant' [the ship] arriving." Beautiful Shanghai
 day. I put on my whites and I go down to the Wusong River and hire a water taxi
 and go out in the middle of the stream and get on board the *President Grant*. It just

⁸¹ Langston Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes Vol. 1: The Poems: 1921-1940*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 249-251.

⁸² "Earl Whaley Returns from China: Musician Describes Life in Japanese Concentration Camp," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 15, 1945.

⁸³ Paul De Barros, *Jackson Street After Hours: The Roots of Jazz in Seattle*, (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1993), 49.

so happened that one of the waiters had took a dose of clap in Manila and they had him quarantined on the ship. I played piano and waited tables all the way back, man.⁸⁴

Johnson, like Buck Clayton, could sense the building of Japanese aggression in China and was able to return to the U.S. safely.

Clayton, Hughes, Whaley, and Johnson saw Japanese belligerence firsthand either as witnesses or victims of their hostility. None of these witnesses viewed Japan's opportunistic advance into Mainland China as an attempt to liberate the Chinese people from Western influence. Instead, they commented on the callous nature with which Japanese soldiers in stationed China treated civilians even before the invasion. These perspectives are fairly indicative of how African Americans would have reacted to Japan's war in China if they had had the same understanding of Japan's real intentions. The hostile and harassing manner in which the Japanese soldiers interacted with Chinese civilians even before the war would have been strangely similar to struggles African Americans faced in a segregated Jim Crow South.

While coverage in the black press and the writings of intellectuals indicate a variety of opinions regarded Japanese expansion into the Chinese Mainland, African Americans largely became disenchanted with the promise of a "leader of the colored races." As news detailing the atrocities committed against Chinese civilians in Nanking and other Chinese cities reached African American communities, perceptions of the Japanese began to change. Mentions of Japanese expansion changed from 'liberation' to 'imperialism' and many began to advocate a boycott of Japanese goods to impede their war effort. This increasing awareness of Japanese intentions and actions in China may be a component of African American adherence to the Double Victory campaign and a lack of Fifth Column activities within the United States.

Examining how African American intellectuals, arguably the best informed segment of the population, viewed the Japanese leading up to U.S. involvement in World War II, offers

⁸⁴ Ibid., 48-49.

a starting point for determining African American interactions and opinions of the Japanese people and society. However, by focusing on this alone, historians have neglected to show that these perspectives are not indicative of the African American population as a whole. African American intellectuals comprised what W.E.B. Du Bois termed the “talented tenth”; but concentrating on this segment alone ignores the larger African American population entrenched in the social and educational disadvantages of segregation. African American soldiers fighting in the Pacific came from more diverse circumstances and offer a better picture of how African Americans with firsthand knowledge of the Japanese came to view them during and after World War II. With their diverse situations before the war, African American servicemen had varied experiences in their interactions and thus conceptions of the Japanese. Despite this, overall, African American servicemen in the Pacific, while tending to be less racially prejudiced than their Caucasian counterparts towards the Japanese enemy, still regarded the Japanese as a dangerous and ruthless opponent and not as a possible liberator from discrimination in the segregated American military or society at large.

For many African American soldiers, their views of the Japanese were inextricable from their positions within a segregated society and military. Through their interaction with Japanese prisoners of war and their knowledge of Japan as an independent nation of color, many African Americans intensely questioned their unjust treatment within American society. This dissatisfaction, coupled with the mobilization of the African public through the Double V campaign, helped the civil rights movement to grow in the post-war era. Letters to the editors of African American newspapers detailed this mistreatment and educated the public on the actual conditions of black soldiers fighting for “democracy” and “freedom.” In a letter sent anonymously from “a Negro Soldier” to Percival Prattis, editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, on November 14, 1943, one African American servicemen described “the way the disabled Negro soldier is treated here at Camp Ellis [Texas]. Sir the sick and the disabled soldier is

treated worse than a Jap, or German Prisoner ever dreamed of.”⁸⁵ This sentiment was echoed in other letters; Japanese enemy combatants, as foreign nationals, were treated with more respect and given better circumstances than American born blacks. Private John Rivers questioned the difference between America and its fascist enemies given the treatment of African American soldiers in a November 23, 1943 letter to the *Afro-American Newspapers*: “We as soldiers here in Camp Hood, Texas, are really being treated worse than these German prisoners here. We in the camp stockade are being beaten every day until we can’t stand up; drilled all hours of the night... Are we still in America or are we over in Japan or Germany? Are we free Negroes, or still slaves?”⁸⁶ African American soldiers were acutely aware of the great dichotomy between American rhetoric and practice in regards to freedom and democracy. For many, the difference between the United States and their fascist enemies was not that large.

Those African Americans serving overseas in the Pacific also remained entrenched in the same form of segregationist policies they encountered in the American South. The U.S. military sought to export its discriminatory policies, which continued to advantage whites and treat African Americans as second-class citizens, or in some cases, like an enemy. William “Ted” McCullough, an African American officer in the 93rd Infantry Division, recalled in a later interview the tension between Caucasian and African American officers: “I got better treatment than a lot of our black officers maybe because I was a platoon sergeant, but still they treated me like I was the enemy, like a Japanese. Seeing the way the white officers treated the black officers, well, I thought I could just as well shoot them as I could a Japanese.”⁸⁷ It is surprising given these tensions that more African Americans were not receptive to surrendering to the Japanese. Hyman Samuelson, a white officer in the 96th (Colored) Battalion of the Army Corps of Engineers, noted in a July 13, 1943 journal entry

⁸⁵ Phillip McGuire, *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1983), 217.

⁸⁶ McGuire, *Taps for a Jim Crow Army*, 218.

⁸⁷ Maggi M. Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: Black Men and Women Remember World War II* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 146-147.

that rumors were circulating about the possibility that African American personnel would voluntarily surrender to the Japanese with their lack of prospects in the future: “Various personnel are teaching the Colored personnel that they are to be the losers regardless of the outcome of the war. A certain element are determined to voluntarily surrender to the Jap.’ And that is part of the rumors which are circulating among the men. It is a shock to find out that such stuff is true.”⁸⁸ While most African American servicemen in the Pacific did not seriously consider the Japanese as possible liberators from American segregationist practices, some African Americans looked with hope for better conditions from any possible source, considering the lack of opportunities for most blacks back home.

Some African Americans looked upon the Japanese favorably through their interactions with the enemy. Most African American troops in the Pacific were placed in service battalions and not in direct combat situations, which might have influenced some of their opinions, but their contact with the Japanese shows the variety of perspectives that existed during the war. Nelson Peery, later a political activist and member of the Communist Party, detailed his wartime experiences in his memoir, *Black Fire: The Making of an American Revolutionary*. Peery, a soldier in the 93rd Infantry Division, described his deployment on Guadalcanal after major combat had ended and his interaction with the remaining Japanese on the island:

The Japanese airstrip was too small for U.S. Army aircraft. A new one was built a quarter of a mile away. We converted the old strip into a movie theater by laying out rows of coconut logs as seats. When the movies started, the Japanese stragglers would creep out of their hiding places to sit on the cliff overlooking the theater and enjoy the movie. Some kind of unspoken truce evolved. They wouldn’t shoot into the theater, and we wouldn’t attempt to ambush them.⁸⁹

Entertainment and the enjoyment of film transcended the lines of battle similar to the Christmas truce during World War I in which British and German soldiers halted fighting for a

⁸⁸ Hyman Samuelson, *Love, War, and the 96th Engineers (Colored): The World War II New Guinea Diaries of Captain Hyman Samuelson*, ed. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995), 213.

⁸⁹ Nelson Peery, *Black Fire: The Making of an American Revolutionary*, (New York: New Press, 1994), 234.

soccer game. The unspoken truce on Guadalcanal shows the general acceptance of the Japanese as human after combat had ended. Their mutual recognition of the opposing side's humanity and desire to leave behind the horrors of the battlefield complicates the idea of a single, unified viewpoint of the enemy as simian, insect-like, or subhuman.

Bill Stevens, a staff sergeant in the 48th Quartermaster Regiment of the 93rd Infantry Division, also remembered Japanese infantrymen with a level of respect:

Let us just talk about the Japanese or the little 'monkey men.' You do remember the Japanese were referred to in this and other derogatory terms: they were a colored people so the big bad American marines were going to kick their asses properly and put them back in their place. In reality the Japanese were excellent soldiers. They had been fighting in the Pacific for a long time, swallowing up bits and pieces. They had occupied islands, whose names we are all familiar with, and were prepared to be there a long time. Our marines stormed onto the beaches of those islands and they died on them. The Japanese beat the shit out of our legendary marines. That inferior breed happened to be superb contact fighters besides not missing a trick in the book and inventing some new ones. They had all kinds of booby traps. Every trail, every bush, every tree could prove to be disastrous... The Japanese took the great white American ego and used it as a weapon against him. They worked on demoralizing our men by doing such things as keeping the marines awake all night by shaking bushes, sudden noises, and on occasion slithering into a camp and cutting a few throats with a man sleeping beside the victim. The Japanese did everything that kept our men tied in knots.⁹⁰

Like the views of African American intellectuals before U.S. involvement, Bill Stevens intimates that the Japanese were still attacking American white supremacy through their engagement of American marines. While obviously not supporting a Japanese victory, Stevens suggests that there was a lingering sense of vicarious triumph in the debunking of Japanese and colored inferiority. Nelson Peery likewise praises the courage of the Japanese soldiers individually, but criticizes the futility of their sacrifices: "The Japanese were brave, disciplined soldiers, although it was little more than a probing assault, they fought as if it were a main thrust. Again and again, they charged through the minefields and tangled themselves on the barbed wire, disemboweled by mortar and machine gun fire."⁹¹

⁹⁰ Mary Penick Motley, ed., *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), 77-78.

⁹¹ Peery, *Black Fire*, 246.

One the individual level, several African American servicemen had a level of respect for their Japanese counterparts, but the overall Japanese techniques were considered ineffective.

Bill Payne, a black officer in the 369th Regiment of the 93rd Division, criticized the Japanese soldiers for their inability to improvise and innovate:

Like many other American troops, I did not have much respect for the Japanese soldier. They were tough fighters; don't get me wrong. They were really tough fighters because they could maneuver through the jungle and the trees and the caves far better than we could. They had gun emplacements dug between the banyan tree roots. And they had to be routed out of these caves, which was nearly impossible. However, their imagination was limited. They took orders and followed them, and that was it. They followed orders to the letter, and at the end of that order, that was it. There was no individual thinking. Our troops were trained to think for themselves. If they got into a situation, they could find a way to get out. We were taught to follow orders of course, but we were also taught to go beyond that from time to time.⁹²

Payne notes that although African American troops were not necessarily assigned to all of the different roles that white troops were, they were trained and able to make their own decisions on the battlefield. He points to the Japanese soldier's inability to deviate from ordered plans as the main defect in their fighting ability. This viewpoint was common among many American servicemen in regards to both the Japanese and the German military personnel.

Drafted into service in 1946, Charles Earnest Berry never served in combat during the Second World War, but did closely encounter the Japanese when stationed in Hawaii. Before being shipped to serve in Occupied Japan, Berry guarded Japanese prisoners in Honolulu as part of the 25th Division, 24th Infantry Regiment. In a later interview, Berry described his befriending of a Japanese POW: "They [the prisoners] stayed there, and I made friends with one of them... I would give him cigarettes. And this same guy, when I went to Japan, I met him because he got repatriated, and I met him and his family, and we had a real wonderful time."⁹³ Despite this favorable memory of interaction with one of the Japanese POWs, Berry still regarded the prisoners with caution: "The POWs, they're still

⁹² Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army*, 143.

⁹³ Charles Berry Collection (AFC/2001/001/5950), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/5950> (accessed April 10, 2008).

dangerous. We got them with our armed weapons, we had some bad ones, and we had some pretty nice ones in there too. But I still didn't trust none of them."⁹⁴ Berry's experiences seem to bridge the contrast between the positive and negative views of the Japanese from the perspective of African American soldiers. He recognizes the Japanese as entirely human, as a society with both good and bad people.

Robert Alexander, was drafted into the 25th Infantry Division of the Army Air Corps in 1945 and served in the Philippines. He characterized his duties during service as manual labor and his pleasure at having Japanese prisoners, as individuals of lower ranking than himself, take over this work: "I confess to being in a labor battalion, doing labor, which later we were able to hire Filipinos to do for us, and we used Japanese prisoners, who were also good at it."⁹⁵ Compared with several earlier mentions of stateside soldiers comparing their situations within the military to Japanese and German prisoners, Alexander considered his position improved through his interaction with Filipinos and then Japanese prisoners.

For many African American soldiers, there seemed to be no hesitation in considering the Japanese as their enemy. In several cases, African American servicemen in the Pacific had similar recollections and characterizations to those of Caucasian servicemen, such as the dehumanization of their Japanese counterparts. Even those who did not serve directly in the Pacific, such as Private Charles F. Wilson of the Army Air Corps, portrayed the Japanese as no different from the European enemies of the United States: "Our driving back of the Japanese fascists in the Pacific; our driving back of the German fascists in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy, in conjunction with our British and French Allies, freeing that part of the world from 'tyranny and aggression' as the prerequisite for bringing 'freedom, equality, and justice' to the North American and Italian peoples."⁹⁶ For Wilson, the Japanese held no distinction from the other enemies on the basis of color; this shows, like many other

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Robert Alexander Collection (AFC/2001/001/12854), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/12854> (accessed April 10, 2008).

⁹⁶ McGuire, *Taps for a Jim Crow Army*, 134.

servicemen serving in the Pacific, the shift in popular concern away from the prewar alignment with the Japanese.

African Americans in the military during World War II were not placed in combat positions with the same frequency as their Caucasian counterparts, but when faced with such situations, they did not show any uncertainty in considering the Japanese as their enemy. Hyman Samuelson, a white officer in an African American engineering regiment in New Guinea, recorded his experience with the fighting readiness of his men in a May 25, 1943 diary entry:

About ten months ago the Japs were but a few miles from here and we posted a heavier than usual guard around our camp area. I instructed the men that they must be particularly alert at night when some of the Nips might sneak in and kill our boys while they were sleeping. They all seemed to understand. During the night I went out to inspect the guard. "Halt!" shouted one of the sentries. "Who's dere?" "Officer of the Day," I answered. To check whether the sentry knew his duties, I asked him, "Now, Jones, if I hadn't stopped when you yelled 'halt,' what would you have done?" "I'd a called the corp'ral of de guard, suh." "A lot of protection you are to the men asleep. By the time you called the corporal of the guard all the damage could be done. Why in the hell would you call the corporal of the guard anyway?" "To help me carry your dead body away, suh."⁹⁷

Samuelson's encounter with one of his men shows their understanding that the Japanese would not treat them differently in a war zone. Any prewar alliances along the global color line disappeared when it came to protecting their own lives and those of their comrades.

William H. Henry, a steward's mate serving on a destroyer named the *Colhoun*, described an incident in which the African American cook on the ship maintained an overzealous desire to kill two Japanese prisoners:

The Colhoun fished two Japanese pilots out of the ocean [on 8 August]. Mackey was getting ready to cook—after things were all secure—and they had these two Japs on the deck, sitting there... Mackey had this boning knife, and... he's saying t me, 'I'm going to take these two Japs out, I'm going to kill 'em!' That's what Mackey told me. I said, 'Mackey, you can't do that.' I pleaded. If I don't plead for them, Mackey would have killed the... The Japs are sittin' there, just lookin' at me. I knew if they stayed on the ship, they were going to kill them.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Samuelson, *Love, War and the 96th Engineers (Colored)*, 203-204.

⁹⁸ Richard E. Miller, *The Messman Chronicles: African Americans in the U.S. Navy 1932-1943* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 234-235.

Henry's recollections show that for some African Americans, there was no aversion to fighting and even killing the Japanese. It is obvious that the cook felt no connection to these captured Japanese pilots as kindred people of color; to him, they were simply the enemy.

Cecil Patterson, commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant of the 33rd Engineering Battalion at the start of World War II, also mentioned his lack of affinity with the Japanese when discussing his stationing at Biak. The only advantage he felt that his skin color offered was that the segregationist practices of the Army kept him out of combat and thus less likely to be killed in action:

All I know it [Biak] was a rocky, red island full of Japanese and trees. And the trees were important because the Japanese loved to get up in these trees and take a potshot at you. [Interviewer: *Were there any casualties?*] There were casualties, but not that many, because one of the advantages of being black was that you were not put in a combat unit, so you didn't have to go out and find those folks... When you think about it: the Japanese didn't know white from black, and the bullets didn't either, but that was the way the ball bounced.

Patterson did not recognize his skin color as a common connection with the Japanese, or more importantly as a shield from their bullets. This sort of realism shows the breakdown of possible ideological connections that might have existed when facing war conditions.

War correspondent Richard Tregaskis reported combat conditions experienced by Marines in his memoir, *Guadalcanal Diary*, published in 1943. He discussed the views of the Japanese enemy held by Caucasian soldiers and their propensity towards barbarity through the collection of Japanese teeth and pickled ears for jewelry making and other war mementos.⁹⁹ This sort of dehumanization of the Japanese was not peculiar to white servicemen; African Americans also employed this tactic of dehumanization to rationalize the prospect of killing another human being. Howard Hickerson, a Signal Corps member of the 93rd Division, described how Japanese skulls became dehumanized as a stimulus for pranks:

On this occasion, one of the guys had found a Japanese skull—which wasn't very hard to find. You just go out and pick it up. So he put the skull in the guy's mosquito net thing over the bed. We'd been up on a hill sitting with some candles, and then we came on in to go to bed. The guy pulled that string to unroll the net and the skull rolled right into his rack. Well, you know what happened... He ran around the whole

⁹⁹ Richard Tregaskis, *Guadalcanal Diary* (Garden City, NY: Blue Ribbon Books, 1943), 15-16.

tent screaming and hollering. Everybody thought we was under attack or something.¹⁰⁰

Considering the reluctance to surrender or take prisoners by both the Japanese and American forces, it is not surprising that the island battlefields were strewn with human remains, as Hickerson stated. However, the use of Japanese skulls, obviously the physical remain most emblematic of humanity, as methods for pulling pranks shows the lack of meaning and respect some African American soldiers had for the remains of their fellow people of color.

John Dower, in *War Without Mercy*, discusses one of the characteristic contrasts in the dehumanized representations of the Japanese: “A characteristic feature of this level of anti-Japanese sentiment was the resort to nonhuman or subhuman representation, in which the Japanese were perceived as animals, reptiles, or insects (monkeys, baboons, gorillas, dogs, mice and rats, vipers and rattlesnakes, cockroaches, vermin—or, more indirectly, “the Japanese herd” and the like).”¹⁰¹ This rhetoric, while common among media and political cartoon portrayals, also extended to African American servicemen in some cases. William H. Henry, a member of an all black gun crew on the *U.S.S. Indianapolis* during the Salamaua-Lae Campaign in 1943, later recalled his reaction to Japanese aerial attacks:

Everybody’s at general quarters. I’ve got my telephone on. I can hear them out there banging away. I’m walking around the deck looking at everything. I could see—everything. The gun that we’re feeding is right there and these guys in this line are bringing these clips [of ammo] through to fire at torpedo bombers... If we don’t see any planes we don’t fire. But [fighter pilot] Butch O’Hare from the *Lexington* is gobbling up Japanese twin-engine Mitsubishi’s like a seagull grabbing up bugs in the air. He shot down five off the coast of Bougainville.¹⁰²

Henry’s depiction of Japanese planes, and obviously the Japanese pilots inside, as insects, in contrast to his naming of the fighter pilot in the American plane, is an attempt to dehumanize the Japanese and reduce the impact of ending another human life. Tregaskis also reported the similar effort by Caucasian soldiers to make combat into a spectator sport,

¹⁰⁰ Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army*, 152.

¹⁰¹ Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 81.

¹⁰² Miller, *The Messman Chronicles*, 216-217.

with soldiers watching the action like a baseball game.¹⁰³ Efforts by Caucasian and African Americans alike to characterize the Japanese as subhuman were attempts to rationalize the carnage and brutality that Americans encountered firsthand.

Nelson Peery, in the 93rd Infantry Division, related his bayoneting of a wounded Japanese soldier after one of his comrades was killed in action:

Half afraid, half compassionate, I lowered the barrel of my rifle, the bayonet tip inches from his chest. He couldn't have been more than twenty-three. His mouth moved slightly. He closed his eyes, thin lips clamped between his teeth. Suddenly he moved as if to turn over. Instinctively, I lunged against the rifle. The bayonet point disappeared into his body. Kill the bastard—kill him—kill him! The weight of my body pinned him back to the ground. The mouth opened and gasped. The eyes opened and glared at me. The body relaxed, the death stare fixed into the branches of the banyan tree. I answered him, "You made me do it, you mother-fuckin' Jap bastard—you made me do it."¹⁰⁴

Peery showed no reluctance in bayoneting a wounded Japanese soldier in this passage, but in reality it was a reactionary measure to protect his own safety. Back in the bivouac area, Peery rationalized his actions because the knowledge that he had killed someone face to face was drawing a moral conflict within himself.

Brad and I sat quietly watching the embers. He knew I desperately wanted to say something. Finally he spoke softly, still looking into the fire. "What's eatin' ya, man? You still thinking about that Jap?" "Yeah," I answered. "It ain't really bothering me—I guess I learned something." After a moment of awkward silence I went on: "I think I know why white people hate us—why they treat us like they do." "Cause they're fuckin' rotten. That's why. There's something wrong with 'em," Brad interrupted, vomiting out a bit of latent hatred. "Naw, I don't think that's it anymore. After I stuck that guy, for a minute I felt like Jesus looked at me and talked to me. You know I don't believe in God anymore, but I've been taught that it was a sin to kill. I might'a killed somebody else in a firefight—I don't know—that was different. They was shootin' at us and we was shootin' at them. I was sure of this one. I was like Jesus was lookin' at me and said to me 'Thou shalt not kill,' and I know that this fuckin' guy had sent me to hell. He made me do it—and I hated him for what I done. Later on, I got thinkin' those white people go to church and pray and listen to the preachers. They know right from wrong. Then, when they go out an' lynch somebody, or rape some woman, they know they're wrong. They know they've sinned. They believe they got to answer for it sometime. They hate us because they know they're goin' to hell for what they done to us... So then, they got to pretend we're not human. It's different to burn a nigger than a human being. Or rape a nigger bitch instead of a woman. When I stuck that fuckin' guy—I called him a Jap bastard. If I'd of thought 'soldier' or 'man,' I'd of fixed him up and got him to the field hospital."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Tregaskis, *Guadalcanal Diary*, 143.

¹⁰⁴ Peery, *Black Fire*, 236-237.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 239-240.

Peery's self-awareness shows the true motives for most soldiers in their dehumanization of the Japanese enemy. His recognition of the similarities between soldiers' dehumanization of the enemy and the tendency of white supremacists to deny the humanity of their African American victims inspires him to fight against oppression upon his return to the United States.

Peery continued with this method of dehumanizing the Japanese in his discussion of events on Bougainville. As the carnage and brutality on both sides of fighting increased around Peery, he decided to act correspondingly. He described a night when his unit was placed as an outpost line after major combat was over; during the night, some of the remaining Japanese attacked their lines and withdrew: "No one slept that night. In the morning, when heads were counted one man was missing. A patrol, sent out to keep contact with the enemy, found the missing soldier hanging by his thumbs from a banyan tree, his body pierced by fifty bayonet wounds. Kill the bastards. Trapped like two wild animals on the island, only one could survive. We began to act accordingly."¹⁰⁶ This sentiment was continued in his discussion of an artillery barrage on Bougainville: "The artillery compressed five thousand Japanese into a mile-square area that shook and trembled with belching fire and scalding phosphorous and hot steel that hurled body parts into the trees to rot in the putrid air. Plotting on the maps each suicidal assault, we called for yet another barrage of hell to hurl them into the river and blast them into rat food."¹⁰⁷ With the brutal fighting that occurring in the Pacific, it is not surprising that human lives became devalued and the termination of the enemy's lives was cause for celebration. But it is important to note that African Americans in the Pacific, who before the war had championed that Japanese cause and detested the ignorance of the white supremacist rhetoric, engaged in forms of Japanese dehumanization similar to Caucasian servicemen.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 246.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 248.

The shift in thinking among African American soldiers may have been the same as among African American intellectuals. Peery, while conversing about the idea of a global color line, reports his reasoning for fighting against Japan:

[Peery:] "The world is divided between two race groups. One group does nothing but make war on the other. The white exploits the colored and uses the money they make to build armies and organize for more war to take more money."

[Carmen, his girlfriend in the Philippines:] "Why didn't you fight for Japan?"

"Japan? That's the shit we've got to get rid of. Why the hell were they fighting China?"

"Because they're an oppressor nation. An imperialist nation"...

"I'm only saying that we can get together and crush the damned imperialists once and for all"...

[Peery:] "I'm doing everything in my power to learn war and get the rest of our people to learn war and to unite all the colored people."

[Carmen:] "You want to start with Japan? You fought the Japanese."

"What kind of question is that? Of course I fought the fuckin' Japanese..."

"Why did you fight them?"

"Why? What do you mean by why?"

"They're colored"...

"Sure they're colored. They don't act like it. They think they are white. They act white. Look what they did to China."¹⁰⁸

For Peery, Japanese actions rather than skin color determined whether they belonged to the oppressed part of the global color line. In reaction to the shooting of two wounded Japanese soldiers at point blank range with automatic rifles on Morotai, he said: "Fuck 'em. That's what they get for what they did in Nanking."¹⁰⁹ Peery's characterization of the Japanese as traitors to their skin color focused on Japanese transgressions in China, not the longstanding occupations of Formosa and Korea. This shows how closely the views of African American intellectuals reflected that of the greater community as well. The image, or more likely illusion, of Japanese expansion and "liberation" of Formosa and Korea from possible white rule was shattered by reports of Japanese atrocities against the Chinese people.

Peery and several other African American servicemen in the Pacific reacted the use of the atomic bomb against the Japanese on August 6 and 9 at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in different ways. Despite much criticism in recent years of Truman's decision to use the bomb, many were supportive of his decision to end the war through a method that minimized the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 310-311.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 269.

number of American lives lost. Peery, however, with one of the dissenting opinions attributed the use of the bomb to racism:

As we received news confirming the bombing of Hiroshima, the discussions became immediately political. "Sure, they'll use that bomb on the Japanese. Know why? 'Cause they're colored. That's why! They didn't use it on the Germans. Know why? 'Cause they're white. That's why!" "I don't believe Roosevelt would have used that bomb. Burning up all of those children ain't right."¹¹⁰

While Peery mentioned the atomic bomb as a specific instance of racism against the Japanese, he did not comment on the aggressive incendiary bombs of Japanese cities (and German cities as well), which killed as many civilians as the atomic bombs.

Many other African American veterans, recalling their wartime experiences decades later for oral history projects and thus fully understanding the consequences of the use of atomic weapons, maintained that it was the right course of action for ending the war. Robert Alexander, a member of a labor battalion in the Army Air Corps, was aware of what their manual labor was accomplishing: "We were preparing those airfields to take off for Japan, and had it not been for the dropping of the atomic bomb in August of 1945, I may have been one of those soldiers killed fighting on one of those Japanese islands. It was a worthwhile work."¹¹¹ Albert J. Parker, an enlisted man in the 372nd Infantry Regiment of the 93rd Infantry Division, responded similarly when questioned about the use of atomic bombs at the end of the war: "I felt that President Truman made a good decision. Later, I got to Japan on a visit, and I think we would have paid an awful price. But at the time he used the weapon, I think we were beginning to win anyhow, so I felt really good about it."¹¹² Norman Payne, a member of the 52nd Defense Division of the Montfort Point Marines, also voiced his support: "When the war ended I was overseas, no matter how it ended. I think everybody was happy. You said I drop[ped] the bomb, but as far as we were concerned we were overseas. People at home viewed the bomb and later on, it wasn't me, but if you go through two years in the

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹¹¹ Robert Alexander Collection, Veterans History Project, Library of Congress.

¹¹² Albert Parker Collection (AFC/2001/001/32328), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/32328> (accessed April 10, 2008).

war and I said drop the bomb.”¹¹³ Mortimer Augustus Cox, a marine in the 51st Defense Battalion, mentioned his feelings specifically surrounding the more controversial use of a second atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki: “We were praying for the second bomb, you know, and I still do not blame... Historians now second-guess Truman about that second bomb, but I thank him for it because we didn’t [have to invade].”¹¹⁴ Many African American veterans from various branches of service viewed the atomic bombs, while undoubtedly tragic, as necessary in their ability to bring a quicker conclusion to the war without risking American lives in an invasion of the main islands of Japan.

African American servicemen, facing the Japanese as an enemy in the Pacific Theater, showed very little evidence of viewing the Japanese as “colored” brethren or comrades in the fight against white supremacy. While enduring the disadvantages of a segregated military, many African Americans related their positions to those of Japanese prisoners and the Japanese as their own separate nation of people of color. Despite these positive interactions with the Japanese in the context of white supremacy, most African Americans had no doubt considered the Japanese to be the enemy of their country and thus themselves. In addition to this lack of hesitation to engage the Japanese, African American servicemen actively dehumanized the Japanese enemy in order to rationalize the brutality of war. African American veterans, like many of their Caucasian counterparts, also tended to be supportive of Truman’s decision to use the atomic bombs in bringing an immediate end to the war without an invasion of Japan. These views indicate that the prewar feelings of commonality had all but disappeared from the minds of African Americans fighting in the Pacific. Japan’s former rhetoric of ‘Asia for Asiatics’ and ‘Champion of the Darker Races’ was usurped by their atrocities and brutality in the minds of African American servicemen.

¹¹³ Norman Payne Collection (AFC/2001/001/49177), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/49177> (accessed April 10, 2008).

¹¹⁴ Mortimer Cox Collection (AFC/2001/001/43735), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/43735> (accessed April 10, 2008).

Japanese conduct beginning in 1937 directly led to the reshaping of African American perceptions in the context of a global color line. Whereas previously skin color alone had been enough to form an alliance around the world, this concept was reconstructed when perceptions of imperialism and oppression no longer precisely fit into ideas of white and nonwhite. The oppression and massacre of fellow people of color by the Japanese military in China complicated notions of nonwhite solidarity and ultimately led to disenchantment with images of the Japanese Empire. African American servicemen in the Pacific likewise reconstructed perceptions of the Japanese with the remarkable absence of any connection as people of color. Through their reception by civilians in Occupied Japan and the stark contrast with their positions within the American military, African American notions of the Japanese were once again transformed.

Chapter 3: Occupation of Japan

The occupation of Japan and the need to reintegrate Japan as an ally against the Communist influence in East Asia caused a shift in mainstream American perceptions of the Japanese. John Dower, in *War Without Mercy*, develops this reversal of wartime racisms in his conclusion to show how Japan and the United States were able to develop rather peaceable relations after such vicious hostilities. Previous simian portrayals of the Japanese were only slightly altered to make them more like friendly pet monkeys.¹¹⁵ His argument first lays out the paternalism of Americans in which they attempted to help their “little brown brother” to form a peaceful democracy, obviously subordinate to the will of the United States.¹¹⁶ Accompanying this self-serving guidance, U.S. Occupation leaders sought to create Japan as an American friendly entity within the balance of power in East Asia.¹¹⁷ With the Communist victory in China in 1949 and the threat of a Communist expansion into Korea, Japan became the all-important anti-Communist outpost of American influence in Asia. Reintegrating the Japanese into the U.S.’s sphere of Cold War allies became more important than the previous disarmament initiatives.¹¹⁸

Dower’s discussion of the Occupation of Japan and its reconstruction of the Japanese identity to fit into American diplomatic and defensive strategies, however, is a very top-down, policy-oriented approach to this reconfiguration. In the case of African American servicemen stationed in Japan during the occupation period, their interaction with the Japanese on the personal level refashioned their opinions of the Japanese from their previous wartime experiences. Despite the efforts of the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (SCAP) occupational institution to export the segregationist policies of the United States, African American soldiers were able to interact and develop positive impressions of the Japanese people through various interactions with society. These favorable associations

¹¹⁵ Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 302

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 303-305.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 312.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 309-310.

differed from prewar conceptions: whereas prewar interactions focused on the global color line and commonalities because of racial ties, African Americans in the occupation regarded the Japanese positively for their relative colorblindness and acceptance of African Americans on equal terms.

For many African Americans stationed in Japan, their interactions with Japanese civilians were considered a welcome change from the racism of the U.S. military and society at large. The Japanese treated African Americans as Americans, not specifically as African Americans despite the efforts of occupational forces to circulate segregationist ideas within Japan. It was this kind of encouraging reception that allowed many African American soldiers to see what living in a more open society would entail and made them less likely to accept the status quo back in the United States. In 1948, President Truman issued Executive Order 9981 officially desegregating the military. Unfortunately, with the sluggish response of the military to accomplish this directive, some military units remained segregated throughout the occupation period.

Ivory Perry, later a civil rights activist in St. Louis, serving in occupied Japan and then the Korean War as a member of the all African American 24th Infantry Regiment (of the 25th Division, 8th Army), had joined hoping that he would face less discrimination in an allegedly integrated army. Unfortunately he was met with the same kind of prejudice that he had faced in the United States. George Lipsitz details Perry's experiences gathered from oral histories:

Wherever segregation went, injustices followed. Black soldiers found that they could not become high ranking officers, even in all-black units. Each military post had separate service clubs for blacks and whites. White soldiers could bring Japanese women on post with them, but black soldiers could not. Even off the base, white soldiers frequently refused to patronize Japanese businesses that served black customers. These practices did not surprise Ivory Perry, but they did disappoint him. He had hoped to leave racism behind when he joined the army, but it looked as though the same old things that had troubled him in Arkansas existed in the military too.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ George Lipsitz. *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 40.

Perry witnessed the attempt of some American servicemen to export segregation to Japan and force Japanese citizens to also display bias against African Americans. Perry's recollections, however, juxtapose this prejudice by Americans with the kindness of the Japanese civilians:

In contrast, Perry felt that the Japanese people treated black soldiers very nicely. He met students and professors from Japanese universities who could speak English and who knew as much, or more, about the racial situation in the United States as he did. From them, he learned that differences in skin color did not automatically have to mean prejudice and hatred. As he learned more about Japanese customs and beliefs, he came to feel that all human beings had the same basic desires.¹²⁰

Perry's interaction with the Japanese shows none of the hostilities or dehumanization that occurred during the war, but exactly the opposite, a desire to mutually exchange ideas and culture with the Japanese on an equal level.

Thomas Hayswood McPhatter, a sergeant in the Montfort Point Marines who had previously served in combat on Iwo Jima, had a similar impression of the Japanese during the occupation:

You know, the only time I was treated as a human being in the Marine Corps was by the Japanese after we conquered them. Less than a week after the bomb was dropped we pulled into the harbor of Hiroshima. The Japanese received me and treated me well, even though they were hungry. That was not my experience with the Marine Corps. I found the corps to be racist, particularly when I had to interface with authority. I wasn't expecting any kind of payoff other than being treated like a man, but even that was hard for them.¹²¹

Serving in Japan through 1946, McPhatter was apt to see the most hostile period of the occupation, but instead felt welcomed by the Japanese, even the surviving residents of Hiroshima. McPhatter had served on Iwo Jima for two and a half months starting on D-Day through some of the most vicious fighting of the war. As a combat veteran, McPhatter's affinity for the Japanese resulting from his interaction with them during the occupation shows how strongly the reception of African Americans in Japan had reconstructed his perception of the enemy.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Yvonne Latty, *We Were There: Voices of African American Veterans from World War II to the War in Iraq* (New York: Amistad, 2004), 23-26.

Charles Earnest Berry, who had previously served in Hawaii guarding Japanese POWs, was stationed in Japan from 1947 through 1949 with the 1st Corp, 24th Infantry Regiment, 25th Division. While Berry had taken a realistic approach when discussing his interaction and trust of the Japanese prisoners, his discussion of the Japanese during the occupation is overall favorable. Through his interaction with individual Japanese people, not the orders of SCAP reacting to the perceived threat of the Comintern, Berry came to view the Japanese in very high esteem:

Japan was very beautiful, especially with the castles and the architecture, and all that [jazz], absolutely fascinating. The people were still hostile but a lot of Americans made them hostile too. Because we had a lot of rapes and stuff going on and most Americans were there with a big head anyhow... other than that, everything was real nice. They treated me nice, and that's when I met my buddy, the POW. I was sitting at a little stand, like an open restaurant, where they take this fish, chicken, and steak, and fry it in a deep fat and a little wok, and I was eating that, and somebody touched me on the shoulder, and I looked around and it was him. And he said, no more of this, so then I yeah. *[Interviewer: Went to his house?]* Yeah. I met his family and everything.¹²²

Berry likewise commented on the attempt of American forces to export racism against African Americans to Japan, with not so successful results: "American soldiers were so prejudiced against Negro soldiers, that they tried to institute their beliefs on the Japanese, and it didn't come true. [For] some of them it did, but not all of them."¹²³

Charles Loeb, a press correspondent in the Pacific with the National Negro Publishers Association and the Associated Negro Press, had the distinction of being one of the first Americans in Tokyo after the surrender. John D. Stevens, detailed the exploits of African American correspondents in his monograph, "From the Back of the Foxhole," in 1973:

With three white correspondents, they [Enoc Waters of the *Chicago Defender* and Loeb] had the distinction of being the first Americans in Tokyo arriving before MacArthur through some clerical error in their travel request from the U.S. command headquarters in Yokohama. "We could have been killed," Loeb says. "People just looked at us and bowed, and we bowed back. There wasn't an American soldier in the whole city. We went down in the Ginza and bought souvenirs. We went to the

¹²² Charles Berry Collection, Veterans History Project, Library of Congress.

¹²³ Ibid.

Imperial Hotel and had dinner—and we came back to write our stories and almost got thrown out of the theater.”¹²⁴

While still in a state of shock, the Japanese treated Loeb and his fellow correspondents with a level of respect through their use of bows in greeting, and not hostility.

Donald R. Carter, drafted into the 4418 Quartermaster Service Company and serving from 1945-1947, also remembered his service in occupied Japan in a favorable light.

Recalling his impressions upon arriving in Japan, he stated: “when I got overseas, I landed at Yokohama, Japan. And entering that world, it was spectacular. It was interesting; I was in a new world.”¹²⁵ When asked in an oral history interview to name his most memorable experiences while in service, many of them focused on his experiences while in Japan:

One memorable experience was when I was recuperating in the hospital in Osaka, Japan. I got a chance to visit areas like Nagoya, and found that just such a spectacular area, seeing what the Japanese do and night fishing, and things of this nature... I do recall I learned to, when I was on Hokkaido, to ski, cross-country ski. I had a Finnish ski instructor; we went up a mountain and skied down. I slept out in 12 below temperatures; I did a reconnoiter about seven miles from Russia. Those were memorable experiences.”¹²⁶

Through the peaceable relations with the Japanese, Carter was able to come in contact with the Japanese and become immersed in Japanese culture. His ability to observe the Japanese and learn about their fishing techniques, something obviously of interest to Carter, shows his capacity for interacting with the Japanese on an individual level.

Yukiko Koshiro, in *Trans-Pacific Racisms and the U.S. Occupation of Japan*, briefly discusses the associations between African American servicemen and the Japanese population at large. Koshiro writes concerning the fall of 1945:

Interactions between black Americans and the Japanese also began, as hundreds of Japanese stevedores worked under the supervision of black noncommissioned officers on the Yokohama docks. According to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a leading black newspaper, black troops were impressed at how rapidly the Japanese were getting accustomed to them and said that “their initial awe and unconcealed curiosity is being replaced by friendly overtures.” One black private, comparing this friendly

¹²⁴ John D. Stevens, “From the Back of the Foxhole: Black Correspondents in World War II,” in *Journalism Monographs*, Bruce H. Westley, ed. no. 27 (February 1973), 47-48.

¹²⁵ Donald Carter Collection (AFC/2001/001/15263), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/15263> (accessed April 10, 2008).

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

atmosphere in Japan to the Jim Crow situation back home, was quoted as saying: "We have encountered not the slightest sign that the Japanese regard us as anything but Americans."¹²⁷

The quoted African American private summarizes the shift in opinions regarding the Japanese most succinctly. Unlike prewar alignments with the Japanese based on the idea of a global color line and commonality between African Americans and Japanese constructed on race, African Americans in Japan during the occupation were pleased over their relatively colorblind reception. Instead of treating African Americans differently, either poorly or favorably based on the color of their skin, the Japanese, in the eyes of the African American occupiers, treated them the same, which was the right they were entitled to, but denied within the United States and the military.

African American servicemen became acutely aware of the great distinction between the democratic and freedom espousing rhetoric of the United States and their actual policies. This dichotomy was acute within Hollywood's films and American propaganda films of the era. In the film *Bataan* (1943), Wesley Epps, played by Kenneth Spencer, was a former preacher thrust against all odds into an integrated platoon with a mission to destroy a bridge on the Bataan peninsula and keep the Japanese from reconstructing it. In the film, Epps is considered as a member of the unit and his contributions earned him a hero's status.¹²⁸ Similarly, the propaganda film, *Our Job in Japan*, shown to Occupation forces in Japan in November 1945 attempted to pacify racial tensions within the military. During the 18 minute film, African Americans were only featured once for a few seconds as the narrator discussed American ideals: "We can prove that most Americans don't believe in pushing people around, even when we happen to be on top. We can prove that most Americans do believe in a fair break for everybody regardless of race, or creed, or color."¹²⁹ These images of inclusion, and in some cases blatant fabrications of African American circumstances,

¹²⁷ Yukiko Koshiro, *Trans-Pacific Racisms and the U.S. Occupation of Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 52.

¹²⁸ Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 72-73.

¹²⁹ United States War Department, *Our Job in Japan*, VHS, (Irwindale, CA: Barr Films, 1945); Koshiro, *Trans-Pacific Racisms*, 55.

heightened the perceptions of many African American troops to the irony of their role as a democratizing force within Japan.

The interaction between African American soldiers and Japanese women is worth focusing specifically on. John Dower, in *Embracing Defeat*, discusses Japanese 'panpan girls' as a kind of ambassadors traversing social and racial barriers based on the assertions of Japanese social critic Tatsuno Yutaka, "because they have transcended racial and international prejudice."¹³⁰ Dower continues:

In certain areas, the panpan trade was strictly organized not merely into territories (called *shima*, literally "islands"), but also in regard to clientele. Some panpan serviced only Japanese customers; others much more numerous, serviced Americans. The distinction was rigidly observed in certain *shima*, and panpan who transgressed either turf or race could be subjected to abuse or even torture by other prostitutes... Thousands of panpan consorted openly and comfortably with both white and black GIs. Even while being looked down upon, they came to exemplify a certain tolerance toward other races and an undeniable independence in their defiant behavior as a whole.¹³¹

Dower also discusses the fraternization of Japanese women with African American soldiers as a transitional process, that at first the women were reluctant: "Initially, women designated for use by black soldiers were said to have been horrified—until they discovered that many black GIs treated them more kindly than the whites did. In their meticulous preoccupation with race and racial hierarchy, some Japanese concluded that such relative kindness derived from the fact that black soldiers had been socialized to regard them as 'whites.'"¹³² Given that women made up the segment of the Japanese population that African American soldiers most closely associated, it is important to assess these interactions further.

Yukiko Koshiro continues her discussion of African American and Japanese interaction in the context of fraternization between African American soldiers and Japanese women during the Occupation through the use of official statistics on intermarriage and interracial children in Japan. Passed in June 1947, Public Law No. 126 allowed racially ineligible [Japanese] alien brides to enter the United States between July 23 and August 21

¹³⁰ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: Norton, 1999), 133.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, 130.

of 1947. Koshiro relates that, “on August 22, a day after this thirty-day amnesty expired, the Associated Press reported that a total of 823 marriages had taken place in occupied Japan between American men and Japanese women during that period. Of the Americans involved, 597 were Nisei, 211 were white, and 15 were black.”¹³³ Difficulties relating to racism in the military made the number of African American soldiers eligible to bring Japanese wives into the United States artificially low. Marriages between American soldiers and Japanese women were only recognized if performed at the American consulate and required the approval of the serviceman’s commanding officer. Those married outside of these guidelines were not considered legally married in the eyes of the American government and were not allowed to apply for amnesty under Public Law No. 126. With these strict rules, it was quite difficult for Caucasian and Nisei to be married, and almost impossible for African Americans.

Koshiro also cites a 1952 Division of Health and Welfare Statistics report disclosing the “Statistics on the So-Called Mixed-Blood Children.” The report indicated the background of interracial children, 84.3 percent of which were fathered by Americans: “Of these 3,490 children, 86 percent were half-white, 11.5 percent half-black, and 2.8 percent undistinguishable. Forty-eight percent of the total were legitimate children, 39 percent were illegitimate, and 13 percent had fathers unknown.”¹³⁴ The 16 countries constituting the remaining 15.7 percent of paternity had relatively few servicemen of African descent. Thus, the approximately 400 Japanese-black children included in the survey were most likely of African American descent.

Paul R. Spickard, focusing on issues of ethnic identity and intermarriage in his work, *Mixed Blood*, discusses the reception and issues of Japanese women who accompanied their African American husbands to the United States following World War II. Many

¹³³ Koshiro, *Trans-Pacific Racisms*, 157.

¹³⁴ Kōsei-shō Daijin Kanbō Tōkei Chōsa-bu, shakai fukushi tōkei nenpō, 1952 (Division of Health and Welfare Statistics, Welfare Minister’s Secretariat, The Social Welfare Statistics, Annual Report, 1952), (2) “Iwayuru konketsuji jittai chōsa [Statistics on the So-Called Mixed-Blood Children].” In Koshiro, *Trans-Pacific Racisms*, 266.

Japanese war brides faced discrimination and lingering war-hatred from many Americans; however, their African American husbands were better able to understand the possible discrimination than their white counterparts:

America's ambiguous racial caste system represented some difficulties for the wives of Black men. On a trip through the South, one woman found that she was allowed to stay in White hotels while her husband had to sleep in the car. But there were advantages for Black-Japanese couples, too. Black men had experienced discrimination from Whites and could teach their wives how to deal with it, whereas few White husbands could offer strategies for coping.¹³⁵

Spickard also comments on the reception of Japanese war brides within the African American community stating, "most Black Americans seem to have had sympathy for these women of color and welcomed them to their communities. Still, there were signs of resentment from some Black women who did not want anyone trespassing on their male territory. And some Black women and men like some Whites, nursed lingering hatreds from World War II."¹³⁶ Similarly, Naoko Shibusawa comments on the portrayal of Japanese war brides in the United States in her work *America's Geisha Ally*. She asserts, "One in four Americans who married a Japanese women was either Nisei or an African American, but images of those relationships were rare in the American mainstream media."¹³⁷

Aside from scholarly appraisals of the interaction between Japanese women and African American servicemen, veterans also fondly recall their interactions with Japanese women, even if the U.S. forces attempted to infuse segregation into all aspects of the Occupation. Billy Rowe, a war correspondent in the Pacific for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, detailed in an October 27, 1945 article the ordered segregation of 'geisha' houses. He stated that this kind of racism was the first of its kind in Japan: "Discussing the race problem with several Japanese newsmen, I was told that Japan has never been touched by racial prejudice and discrimination. They fear, however, that in a desire to please the bulk of

¹³⁵ Paul R. Spickard, *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 143.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 49-50.

Americans, it will grow in various amusement sections.”¹³⁸ Despite this attempt at decreed segregation, Rowe reports that most African American soldiers had a good rapport with the Japanese: “So far the men have been treated just like any other American. Many of them have Japanese friends and enjoy the hospitality of their hosts. Love making suffers because of the difference of language, but as one GI put it, ‘Who wants to make love anyway?’”¹³⁹

For other African American servicemen, language differences did not seem to pose an insurmountable problem. Charles Berry, serving in the 24th Infantry Regiment, fondly recalled his engagement to a Japanese girl:

Well there was talk of some [violence] but in Kyoto and Yokohama and Tokyo, and down in Fukuoka, but I went to Fukuoka too, but I didn’t experience anything. In fact the people were nice to me, of course we were having fun with the Japanese girls too. I got engaged to marry a Japanese girl too. But the reason for that is when I headed back, she was nice enough, but she caught pneumonia and died [in Japan]. And she came from a real nice family, her father was a doctor, but he couldn’t save her.¹⁴⁰

Berry’s comments show his close, serious relationship with a Japanese woman, and engagements between African American and Japanese women were not uncommon. For many African Americans in Japan, it was through meeting Japanese women that they were able to become more familiar with Japanese customs and family values.

Overall, African Americans were able to reconstruct their affinity for the Japanese during the Occupation period, but through a different manner. The idea of a transnational alliance of all people of color no longer entered the mind of African American servicemen stationed in Japan following World War II. The interpersonal connections African Americans made with Japanese civilians overshadowed most wartime animosity and allowed them to form friendships with the Japanese on the basis of equality. It was this equality that most African Americans cherished during their service. While faced with segregation and discrimination within the military and the rest of American society, African American service

¹³⁸ Billy Rowe, “Separate ‘Geisha’ Houses for Negroes and Whites: GI Bigotry Threatens U.S. Plan in Japan,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 27, 1945.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Charles Berry Collection, Veterans History Project, Library of Congress.

men began to admire their comparatively colorblind relations with many Japanese people. Attempts by American occupational forces to introduce the ideas of segregation and racism into Japanese society were not effective in deterring Japanese-African American interactions. In a time when the image of the Japanese was being refashioned in order to incorporate Japan into the U.S.'s coalition of allies against Communism, African Americans overlooked this official rhetoric and instead relied on personal connections when forming opinions of the Japanese. Interactions with Japanese women became the means of entry, for many African American men, into understanding Japanese culture and values in a broader context. This reception by the Japanese made African Americans less likely to accept the status quo of segregation and discrimination at home in the United States and serves as one reason among many for the increasing progress and growing intensity in the Civil Rights Movement after World War II.

Conclusion:

Since the 1905 Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War, African Americans had constructed perceptions of the Japanese within their own paradigm of racial discrimination. Until the invasion of China, many blacks observed the Japanese vicariously, with the hope that Japan's independence and rise in power would advantage their own situation within the United States. Japanese atrocities and undisguised imperialism against a fellow nation of color shattered the hopes of many for an alliance along the global color line. Hostilities on the battlefield solidified viewpoints that the Japanese were an enemy of African Americans, who showed no hesitation in considering them as such. African American reception by Japanese civilians during the Occupation reconfigured these ideas again, as the perception of the Japanese "enemy" was transfigured, not by an attempt to reintegrate Japan as a Cold War ally, but through personal interactions. Overall, World War II led to a drastic change in African American perceptions of the Japanese: African American views of Japan transformed from the concept of a Japanese model for other peoples of color to a colorblind nation accepting of African Americans as equals.

These experiences within Japan also transformed African American visions of life in the United States and sharpened their sense of alternatives to the Jim Crow status quo. African American soldiers serving in Occupied Germany had similar experiences with a freer, more open reception from the German "enemy" than their own fellow troops. In both cases, African Americans, having been victims of oppression and discrimination for centuries at the hands of white Americans, were overall friendlier and less hostile to civilians in both Japan and Germany.

African Americans in Germany faced a similar reception during the occupation that opened their eyes to new hopes and expectations for living in a society without racial discrimination. A survey of civilians in Mannheim conducted by the Office of Military Government for Germany US (OMGUS) in 1946 reported the reactions of Germans to African American occupiers: "When asked about the behavior of Negro soldiers, a

substantial number (36%) said that the Negroes were friendlier toward the German populace than white troops and only 16 percent said they were less friendly. Most respondents (45%) reported that they were definitely not afraid of Negroes in Mannheim, as opposed to 15 percent who expressed fears.”¹⁴¹ In *GIs and Fräuleins*, Maria Höhn discusses the very similar experiences of African American troops in Occupied Germany:

Germans were stunned at how well the black soldiers treated them, but black soldiers were equally amazed that most Germans approached them with much more tolerance than did white American soldiers. In the aftermath of Germany’s bitter defeat, many Germans preferred the black GIs to the white soldiers, because black GIs were more generous with their food rations. Black GIs also did not approach the defeated Germans with the sort of arrogance that many of the white soldiers displayed. Because of this humiliation of their defeat, Germans also experienced a certain kinship with the black GIs, convinced that black GIs, just like themselves, were treated as second-class citizens by the white Americans.¹⁴²

The experience of African American servicemen abroad in the immediate Postwar Era helped them see possibilities for people of color at home. Soldiers returning home from service in Germany and Japan had seen the possibilities of living in a society where a difference in skin color did not automatically signify discrimination and hatred.

Upon return to the United States, however, conditions had not improved for many African Americans despite their support of a war for democracy and equality. Black veterans were given greater access to education under the GI Bill, but still not with equal opportunities as whites. The GI Bill provided support to veterans under the administration of state officials, meaning that discriminatory policies in the American South, which had disadvantaged African Americans for centuries, continued in the postwar period. Historically Black Colleges became inundated with applications, as black veterans could not apply to many universities that still excluded African Americans.¹⁴³ Many African American veterans were also excluded from GI Bill funded housing divisions, such as Levittown, which also denied access

¹⁴¹ Anna J. Merritt and Richard J. Merritt, eds., *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany: The OMGUS Surveys 1945-1949* (Illinois, 1970), 107f in Manfred Malzahn, *Germany, 1945-1949: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 78-79.

¹⁴² Maria Höhn, *GIs and Fräuleins: The German-American Encounter in 1950s West Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 90-91.

¹⁴³ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, and Co., 2005), 129-134.

to prospective black residents, and African American neighborhoods were often redlined from receiving mortgages.¹⁴⁴ Even reentering society with these disadvantages, many African American veterans, armed with an awareness of the alternatives to segregation and discrimination from their experiences overseas among their enemies, set about to make their expectations for equality a reality in the land of the victors.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 163-164.

Bibliographic Note:

In researching this thesis, I have consulted a variety of primary and secondary sources relating to the African American experience during World War II and Asian-African American interactions. All of the sources that were instrumental in forming my argument have been cited in the text with footnotes. I have included other works in the bibliography that have been helpful in providing a context for African American-Japanese interaction during the time period but that were not directly cited. For primary sources, I have reviewed journal and newspaper articles, pamphlets, memoirs, oral histories, letters, and films.

The latter half of this thesis relies heavily on the oral history collection of the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress. With greater focus in recent years on collecting the histories of veterans, many of these perspectives were previously unavailable for research. While this collection was very helpful, only 20 percent of the individuals interviewed have indicated their ethnicity, thus limiting the possibilities for expanded research specifically on African American veterans. These interviews and those found in Morehouse's *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army*, Latty's *We Were There*, and Miller's *The Messman Chronicles* are expanding the field's current knowledge of African Americans during World War II and providing unique perspectives from those fighting for democracy in a segregated military.

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